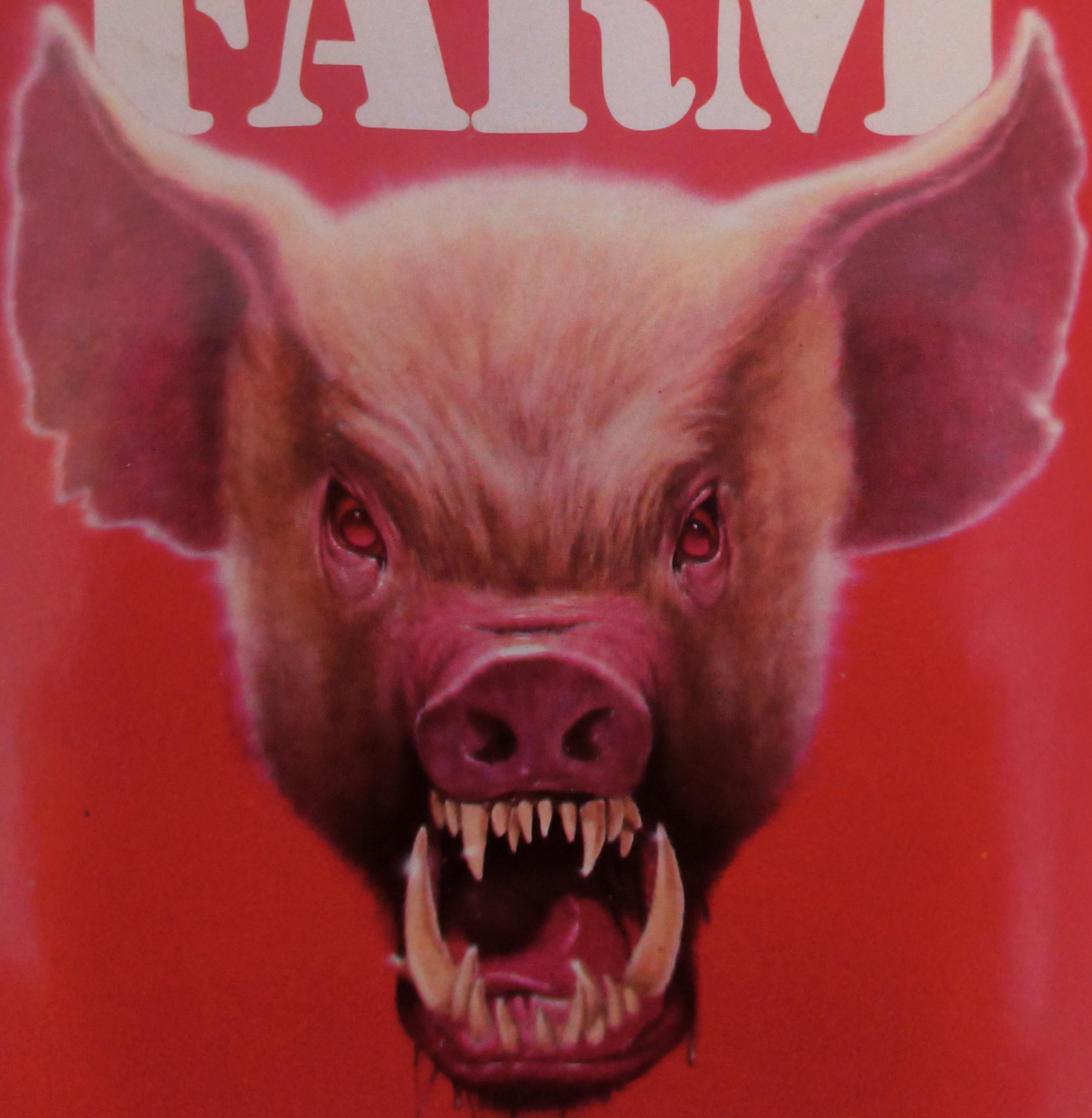
RICHARD HAIGH

THE FARM



WHERE GUT-CRUNCHING, BONE-GRINDING HORROR IS THE ONLY CROP . . .

THROUGH THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH, A NIGHTMARE EVIL CREPT TO ENGULF HOBB'S FARM...

The lethal, body-pulping pile-up on the winding Welsh mountain road was sickening enough. But the spillage of chemicals from the wrecked lorry, leaking through the hidden channels of the earth to contaminate the pond at Hobb's Farm, miles away, produced an unimaginably more horrific effect. As the farm animals drank the tainted water, something strange and sinister began to happen. Soon, previously docile beasts were moving in on their increasingly panic-stricken human 'masters'. Moving in – for the kill...

THE FARM

is one of the most terrifying novels of Nature gone berserk ever written. Here is nightmare horror come to shriek aloud in the very depths of your soul.

Front cover illustration by Les Edwards

ISBN 0-586-05907-5

FICTION/HORROR

UNITED KINGDOM £1.75
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The thunder was deepening, becoming more insistent, the blanketing clouds almost on top of them. Helene found that she was crying. She felt rain pattering on her cheeks, mingling with the salt of her tears. It was all too much for her. For anyone.

As she turned slowly towards the house, holding the little girl's hand, Helene stopped dead in her tracks.

'Paul. Look. Paul.' Finding to her dismay that her voice wouldn't scream. Despite her panic, it stayed low and neutral.

'What?'

'The pigs.' Then her control snapped. 'Look, they're coming out,' she shrieked. 'Oh, sweet Christ! *The pigs!!*'

RICHARD HAIGH

The Farm

PANTHER
Granada Publishing

Panther Books
Granada Publishing Ltd.
8 Grafton Street, London W1X 3LA

First published by Panther Books 1984

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ISBN 0-586-05907-5

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Collins, Glasgow

Set in Times

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This is for John Harvey,
a good friend.
'Just think what tomorrow
will bring . . .'

'For the premise of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* to even approach reality it would take a thousand years of genetically precise selective breeding. Or ten seconds of unimaginable chemical disaster.'

From *Agrarian Sociology* by A. J. Lobkowitz,
The Ladbroke Press, 1980

'Of all domesticated animals the pig has, perhaps, the most attractive public image. Fat, docile and somehow rather amusing. Yet, unlike most of the Artiodactyla (even-toed ungulates) that are ruminants, the pig is virtually omnivorous. It will stand in the summer sunshine, beneath a shaded tree, quietly eating potato peelings. With equal ease it will rend the flesh from a carcass.'

From *Self-Sufficiency – I Did It My Way* by Lynette B. Howell, Strafford Books Inc., Vermont, 1960

Chapter 1

The knife was very sharp.

Its handle was long and narrow, made from the cloven hoof of a Scottish stag, bound around with black insulating tape to give it a firmer grip. The blade was eleven and three-quarter inches in length, tapering to a needle point. The edge had been lovingly honed, using a foot-powered whetstone, with slow, circular movements.

It was so sharp that the edge seemed to shimmer in the humid air. Sharp enough to draw a thread of bright blood when the man tested it on the palm of his left hand barely touching the skin with the cold steel, hissing at the bite.

Outside, the sun was scorching down from a cloudless sky, blue from the purpled slopes of Mynydd Marchnad in the east over to the sharp tops of Moel Cwmdulyn that loomed over the valleys of the west. Even the black mountain itself, Mynydd Du, dominating the main road away towards Caernarfon in the north-west, seemed serene and calm in the summer heat.

Circling on a thermal of warm air, high above the sun-drenched ridges and passes that snaked through the National Park of Snowdonia, a hawk hung, summer-dappled, wings spread as it hovered a thousand feet above the thronging August holidaymakers. Its still eye watched the lines of cars that wound in and out among the dry hills, dotting the parking spaces and spilling over on to quiet verges and disappearing under the rows of trees: sycamores, oaks and ash with a regimented squadron of tended conifers.

But inside the barn the air always felt damp.

It was thatched with reeds, shaded by a massive, ancient oak tree. The stream that filtered down through the farm

came to a brief halt near the doors of the barn, in a calm, green-edged pool with a cluster of stunted rowans. The water provided the main drinking-supply for most of the animals and birds.

The hand that held the knife was steady, the fingers straight, nails neatly trimmed. A steel-banded Rolex Oyster Perpetual Datejust decorated the wrist, almost vanishing under the cuffs of a pale blue denim shirt.

The man wore faded jeans, tucked into a pair of muddied Wellington boots. He walked across the barn with a measured calmness, looking, despite the working clothes, like a senior consultant on his way to discuss a particularly tricky fusing of the lumbar vertebrae with his colleagues.

His knife was almost as sharp as the surgical steel of a scalpel. He liked to have knives sharp enough for their tasks. The honing of them was a special pleasure and he would sit and do it in the evenings, while he listened to the radio.

His shadow strode ahead of him, across the straw-covered earth, towards the corner of the barn. There was a soft whimpering from the darkness and a scrabbling of feet. And the creaking of hemp ropes under pressure.

'Don't struggle, friend,' said the man, voice quiet and cultured. A very English voice, oddly out of place on a Welsh hill farm. 'I promise you that it won't hurt at all. Slight stinging and then . . .'

He nudged the stainless steel bowl a few inches nearer with his foot. His knuckles whitened as he gripped the black-bound hilt of the knife, moving in closer, and stooping. Holding the rope that was knotted about the throat, keeping it still and out of the way of the blade.

'Don't move,' he whispered. 'Don't . . .'

Touching skin with steel, drawing it across with a sigh of sudden determination, bracing his wrist against the angle of the cut. Down the side of the neck, deep and deeper, the lips of the flesh parting, crimson, blood trickling. Then flowing. As the knife cut through the gristle that walled the main

arteries in the throat, the blood jetted into the still air, pattering into the bowl, making its polished sides slick and dull. He pulled with the rope, guiding the limp head towards the container, catching as much of the blood as possible. Careful not to snag his own flesh on the gaping teeth.

He ignored the shrill scream of protest. Watching the flickering of the nerves among the wedge of humped muscle across the shoulders. His eyes saw the flailing of the legs. Desperation.

The man sawed away, inexorably, the metal slicing ever deeper, draining more blood, until it finally grated against the knobbled bones of the spinal column.

Outside his ears caught the thunder, distant, of one of the Royal Air Force's fighter planes, curling in and out among the mountains on one of their incessant radar avoidance exercises.

Inside the barn, the sound of the blood gushing into the metal bowl was weakening as the straining heart pounded less strongly. The knife was tugged free of the broad slash in the neck and the man wiped it with scrupulous care on a piece of hessian tucked into his belt. A belt of expensive hand-tooled leather, ornamented with strung silver dollars, its buckle of polished brass, set with chips of turquoise and jasper, in a scene of a sun rising over a hillside.

A minute or so later he blinked his way out of the cool dimness into the brightness of the August sun. Wondering whether it might not be worth the expense of sending individual pigs away by lorry to the slaughterhouse in Caernarfon, rather than having to come and do the messy, charnel job himself.

It was a problem.

Chapter 2

'If that young man in the sports car drives any nearer to our rear bumper, then I fear that we shall have him sitting in the back of the car next to you, Sister Mary.'

The elderly nun strained around in the seat of the battered Morris Minor and peered myopically out of the window, seeing a dark green Porsche less than three feet away from them. The driver was obscured behind tinted glass. But he was obviously in a hurry, swerving out and then pulling sharply in again as the flow of the traffic in the opposite direction forced him to hold off overtaking.

The soft, wrinkled lips came together in a line of disapproval, and the head turned once more to face the front, the lizard lines beneath the starched wimple smoothing out.

'Such foolishness,' she tutted. 'There must be a hundred cars behind us and twice that number up ahead.' Though she had lived in the Northamptonshire convent for nearly forty years the soft brogue of Munster was still there in her voice.

There was a nun in each of the front seats. One, Sister Audrey, was driving, the long black habit tucked up to leave her sandalled feet free. She wore wire-rimmed spectacles and had the fresh, rosy complexion of someone who had spent much of her life out of doors.

Sister Agnes Xavier was in the passenger seat. Only in her early thirties, she was exceedingly plump; so plump that the seat-belt would barely stretch around her ample stomach and when they were out of town she would unbuckle it with a sigh of relief and ride unsupported. The other nuns chided her over it, particularly after the new legislation was brought in at the beginning of 1983. But she insisted that it was just

too uncomfortable for her with the belt on.

Sister Audrey always teased her about it, warning her what might happen if they were ever to be involved in a road accident.

'Clean through that windscreen, Sister Agnes. Before you could even whisper "Clunk-click". And no time for a last prayer.'

Sister Agnes would lean forward and tap the small statue of the blessed Saint Christopher that protruded from the dashboard. 'He will take care of me, Sister,' she would smile and say.

Even though the Church no longer recognized Saint Christopher's verity, the faithful travellers would still offer up a prayer for his intercession on their behalfs. The statue had been put there by a previous owner of the trusty Morris, and the nuns had chosen to leave it in place.

It was a pretty thing, cast in bronze by J. R. Klaus of Innsbruck. Nearly six inches high, showing the fictional saint striding along with one arm around a timorous pair of children. In his other hand he held a long staff. Though not one of the nuns would have admitted it to the aged Mother Superior, each of them who rode in the car would make a point of touching the figure before beginning a journey. And muttering a quick prayer for a safe trip.

The three nuns were a little like schoolgirls, released for a holiday treat. Sister Mary had been unwell with her asthma and had requested the Mother Superior to allow her to visit her married niece in Llandudno for a couple of days. Permission had been granted and the two younger Sisters had been asked to take responsibility for driving and delivering the convent's oldest nun.

The weather had been wonderful, as it had been for the last few weeks of the summer. They had driven over the high, desolate road through Bala, wondering at the way that the water lay so low in the lakes and reservoirs. The poor start to the season, with heavy rain in May and June, had been

followed by one of the longest droughts that the region had ever known. In many places water was rationed and tankers delivered to some of the higher and more isolated communities. For the waves of holidaymakers it was an idyll of hazy days and warm seas. Their only hardship was the layer of sand in the cloudy jugs of water on their crisp table-cloths.

For the farmers of North Wales the seeds of an overwhelming economic disaster were already sown.

There was the blast of a ferocious horn, sounding the opening notes of 'Dixie', the harsh brass blaring and making Sister Audrey jump. She tugged on the wheel, making the elderly car swerve to the left, nearly clipping a neat dry stone wall. The green Porsche swept by them on a blind corner, cutting sharply in as a grey Volvo, towing a caravan, came towards him in the opposite direction.

In the back of the Morris, Sister Mary crossed herself and hastily wheezed a brace of 'Hail Marys'. In the front, Sister Agnes lurched forwards, steadying herself on the dashboard, nearly banging her hand on the statue.

Sister Audrey pursed her lips and allowed uncharitable thoughts about the young man in the Porsche to flood through her mind, wishing for a moment that she wasn't garbed as a nun and could blow the horn of the Morris. Or even raise two fingers in a somewhat un-Christian gesture at the foolish driver.

'That young chap should have had his bottom spanked a few more times when he was a toddler,' said Sister Agnes, firmly, settling herself down again on the faded scarlet material of the seat.

Sister Audrey said nothing, drawing several deep breaths to calm herself, watching her rear-view mirror fill with the cab of a massive articulated lorry. To try and steady her nerves after the close shave with the sports car she concentrated on reading the lettering across the top of the cab,

her eyes catching the cheeky grin of the unshaven driver. She blushed as she saw the deliberate wink.

There was a word in those stick-on white letters over his head. 'YORKIE'. Of course. That chocolate bar. And on the other side, where a passenger would sit . . . More difficult, the first letter a 'P'. Yes. 'PORKIE'.

The nun smiled at it.

For all his efforts the Porsche was still directly in front of her. It took a struggle of will for her not to drive very close to him, as he had done to her. But that would have been to give in to a malevolent and childish desire for revenge.

Her eyes flicked back to the name of the firm on the red-cabbed truck. It was in fancy Gothic script and it took a real effort to decipher it. But there was nothing else to do as the convoy of vehicles wound its way slowly along the narrow lanes of Snowdonia.

'Jedediah Herneson, Haulage Contractors of Roydon, Essex,' she announced triumphantly.

'What?' said Sister Agnes at her side, startled by the sudden words.

'The lorry that's close behind us. I read the name on it.'

'Oh yes.'

The conversation languished and the day wore on, through the blazing heat. The Morris Minor passed between the mountains of Mynydd Du and Moel Cwmdulyn, following the green sports car, the articulated wagon tucked close in behind it.

Jonny Barton was a fashion photographer, and the gleaming Porsche was one of the loves of his life. Money was firmly at Number One and pretty young boys came in a very close second.

He was in a tearing hurry, already late for a session for an exclusive shop specializing in ladies' boots. Jonny knew that there would be five expensive models lounging around the

ramparts of Caernarfon Castle, with some worried account executive pacing palely up and down with her Cartier watch in her hand and the financial calculator ticking away in her mind.

'Not my bleeding' fault,' he moaned, voice drowned in the stereo pouring out Ian Dury's 'Spasticus Autisticus'.

In fact it *was* totally his fault.

He'd been tied up in bed the night before – quite literally – by a muscular teenage seaman from Mauritius in his Fulham flat. The alarm call had been forgotten and now he was already late. With another twelve miles or so to go it could easily be another hour before he arrived.

The sodding traffic! It had taken a quarter of an hour to squeeze past that great artic. Then another ten to overtake the old car filled with bloody nuns. Now there was another caravan, swaying from side to side like a stagecoach running from the Sioux.

Jonny banged down on the horn, hissing angrily between his perfectly capped teeth. Nifty bit of orthodontic tax evasion was what his accountant had called it. He could feel adrenalin racing through his veins with the tension and the seething anger.

Three times on the way up from London he'd pulled over to the side of the road and taken out the small mirror with the scarlet rose printed on it. And the silver tube, tapered at one end. And the tiny brown bottle containing the ready-cut white powder. He'd snorted a couple of lines of cocaine each time to give himself the illusion that he was speeding along faster than reality.

Now that had worn off and he couldn't possibly stop again. Jonny was irritable and depressed.

He banged the horn once more.

The articulated lorry was heading for the coast. The monstrous volume of holiday traffic had persuaded Angus

Weldon, the driver, to seek an alternative route to the docks at Holyhead. For the last eighteen miles he'd been regretting that decision. The big truck wasn't suited to the winding roads that wormed their way among the heathered slopes. There were too many sharp corners and narrow bends and the traffic seemed to be getting even slower and denser.

The Morris in front of him wobbled in towards the verge as a sheep appeared like a woolly kamikaze pilot on the far side of the road.

'Careful, Sister,' grinned Angus. 'Better to be two minutes late in this world than thirty years too early in the next.'

The line of cars and coaches and caravans came to a long incline and Angus wrestled with the stubborn gear-box. The lorry was barely four years old, yet it moaned and protested like a mule going up a ladder whenever it had to tackle anything other than a flat, straight road. Jed Herneson wasn't exactly tight with money, but the joke among his drivers was that he always used each piece of toilet paper at least four times.

The jerking rattled the clipboard on the dash of the truck. Angus squinted down at it, wondering what it was that he was carrying this time. The trouble with Jed was that he would transport anything and not ask too many awkward questions. Things like tachographs and bills of indenting never plagued him. He had a reputation for being something of a cowboy, and Angus knew personally of at least three times when only luck or bribery had saved his boss from prosecution for illegally shipping dangerous chemicals in his lorries.

The list of drums that he was carrying today meant nothing to Jed. In any case, he guessed that the labels on half of them would be wrong or misleading. His only concern was getting the load to the docks and handing it over. Getting the necessary signatures and pushing off home back to Essex the same day was all that Angus bothered about. There were all sorts of safety rules and regulations that

covered shipments of chemical waste – substances that should never be carried on the same vehicle, and authorities that should have been notified. Police and fire services. But somehow that never seemed to matter to Jedediah Herneson, Haulage Contractors.

Angus reached across and took another Yorkie bar out of the map pocket, hoping it hadn't melted. Tell people often enough that long-distance truck drivers eat Yorkies, and they really will.

Life imitates commercial art.

The school coach was also running very late.

It was a camping trip with forty-two children aged from eleven to fifteen, on their way back towards Shrewsbury and reserved seats on the train to London. Saint Nicholas's Comprehensive from Hoxton, singing their way along after eight days of the best weather that any of the teachers could recall in the five years that they'd been bringing children camping in Snowdonia. Sunny days and warm nights and a friendly farmer whose field they were using.

It could not have gone better.

Nobody had got themselves lost, or been caught smoking or sniffing glue or snatching some illicit sexual experimentation behind the tumbledown byre. Now they were all happily singing along to a cassette that was crackling out the best of Madness.

The road they were on was barely the width of the coach and luxuriant blackberry bushes danced and scraped at the sides. From his height the driver could catch an occasional glimpse of the main road, less than a half mile ahead of his own vehicle.

'Shit,' he mouthed, seeing it blocked in both directions with slow-moving traffic. Most of it cars, leavened with motor-bikes and an occasional caravan. He could even make out a big red articulated lorry, its green tarpaulin

flapping, revealing serried rows of squat metal canisters.

With any luck he might just manage to get down on the main road before the truck reached the junction ahead of them. He pressed his foot a little harder on the accelerator and the coach eased forwards a touch faster. None of the children noticed the increase in speed, though one of the teachers turned and looked nervously out of a side window.

It was becoming almost unbearably hot in the small car and Sister Mary stretched out a frail arm and tried to wind the window down further. But it refused to move at all for her.

'It won't go, Sister,' said Sister Audrey, seeing the movement in her mirror. 'I don't think that it does much good, anyway. Those fumes outside are really choking.'

'Could we not stop for a while, somewhere?' asked Sister Agnes Xavier. She was sweating uncontrollably, perspiration running down the front of her heavy habit, staining it darkly. It trickled between her pendulous breasts, across the rolling expanse of her stomach, dampening her pale thighs. Also it had been a long time since they'd stopped for a drink of black coffee from Sister Mary's vacuum flask, and the pressure on her bladder was becoming distinctly uncomfortable for her.

'There's a turning to the right in a quarter of a mile or so. I noticed it on the map. Leads to an old abandoned quarry. We could pop in there and stretch our legs.'

The motion was carried unanimously.

'Come on, you aimless, wandering bastard!' spat Jonny Barton, hopelessly revving up the powerful engine of the Porsche. But the caravan kept him blocked in solidly behind it. There were two young children in it who were tugging the orange and brown check curtains across, as though they were playing peek-a-boo with him. Staring blank-faced

when he failed to respond to them. One of them was idly excavating something from her right nostril, peering at it before slipping it ruminatively into her mouth.

Jonny made another attempt to get round the vehicle ahead of him. Pulling hastily back as a Land Rover swept by him, driven by a bearded man smoking a pipe.

He glanced down at his watch and saw that he was already twenty-five minutes late.

Angus Weldon was also worried about the time. Jed paid only for the work done, not for the hours that the job might take. Also, those drums of chemicals had taken a long time to load up. Maybe he could slip the man at Holyhead a few pounds to jump the queue, but he doubted it. Which was going to mean a long, tedious and tiring run back through the night along the A5 and on down the motorway.

The gear-box protested as the road wound through a shallow bend and over a hump-backed bridge. Angus could see that the river would normally be singing and foaming among the stained rocks under the bridge. Now there was only a sickly band of glistening mud, with dead fish lying silver, rotting on the side.

There was a junction coming up ahead, only a couple of hundred yards on the right. He could see the white top of a coach nearing the main road, moving quite fast down a hill.

One more vehicle wouldn't make any difference at all to the tourist jam.

The nearer the coach came to the road, the more its driver realized that he was going to be in for a long and irritating wait. At least he could try and squeeze in before the articulated lorry with the flapping tarpaulin.

The singing of the children became louder and louder.

'Welcome to the house of fun . . .'

As the driver of the car towing the caravan saw the speed of the coach, he began to slow. Guessing that if anyone was going to have to give way it wasn't going to be the coach.

Jonny in his sports car saw the brake lights flicker on and figured that this might be it, the chance he needed to leapfrog another place in the line of traffic. He edged out, seeing that the road was clear in the opposite direction for a couple of hundred yards. In his eagerness he didn't notice the sign for the turning on the right. Nor did he see the approaching coach. The Porsche was low on the road, and the high stone walls obscured his view.

Or, perhaps he *did* see it. Perhaps he thought that it would wait for him, giving him the opportunity to get smoothly past and clean away.

Jonny was in so much of a hurry for his assignment that he never realized the driver of the car ahead had actually signalled the school coach to come on in front of him.

On that short straight stretch everyone had been able to speed up a bit, giving their labouring engines a chance, momentarily, to cool down. The Morris had revved up to nearly thirty miles an hour. It was exhilarating after the stop and start tedium. Sister Audrey glanced back over her shoulder at the older nun.

'Soon be at the junction, now,' she said, smiling brightly.

From his height in the cab of the truck, Angus Weldon saw it all. Even though he stamped down hard on the unreliable brakes of the artic, his experience told him that he was going to be too late.

'Fuck it,' he started to say.

It was even too late for that.

Chapter 3

From beginning to end the whole accident took a lot less than five seconds.

Angus Weldon was the last person to be seriously affected and his mind didn't register any cosmic thoughts of finality or a flashing of his life before his widening eyes. Indeed, the last image that his mind accepted was that the driver of the coach was wearing mirrored sunglasses and that he had a plastic Michelin man perched on his dashboard, wearing a large blue sombrero.

There were a series of fragmented images, frozen in time and space, like the crystal splinters of a broken mirror.

The car, towing the swaying caravan, juddering to a halt, allowing the coach full of singing children to pull out into the main road ahead of him.

The green Porsche, dusty, accelerating past him, seeing the looming coach moments too late. Trying to swerve back in again, finding that he had clear run out of room.

The Morris with the three nuns in it, closing fast. Sister Audrey turning back again to the road, seeing disaster looming irretrievably ahead of them. The caravan stopping, and the green car slewing sideways. The coach swerving, looking as though it was aiming itself directly at the little Morris.

She stabbed at the brakes, eyes wide, mouth sagging open in the beginnings of a scream.

Angus Weldon tried. Really tried. He steered the truck towards the right-hand side of the narrow road, but the brakes weren't functioning efficiently and the lorry began to

jack-knife, the cab skidding and the weight of the canisters behind forcing the main body onwards.

The first impact came between the rear of the caravan and the nearside wing of the sports car. Ripping a great gash away in the thin metal, knocking the two children tumbling over the table. The Porsche spun away, Jonny fighting for control. His cameras were falling about in the back of the car as it began to roll up on two wheels, towards the approaching school bus.

The front of the Porsche was crushed in by the shattering force of the impact, sending the engine ripping backwards off its mountings. Jonny was aware only of pressure on his feet and legs and the noise of metal splintering and breaking around him.

The crash meant a change in speed from about forty miles an hour forwards to some fifteen miles an hour backwards, all in a space of eight inches, as the coach powered into the little car. Jonny suffered a stunning deceleration and stunning G-force that nearly snapped his neck.

Then came blackness.

The Morris behind was starting to swing away from the green sports car, the nun tugging at the wheel, sandalled feet cramping on the brakes. But it was too late and too slow, and the front wing of the Morris caught the rear of the Porsche as it was driven backwards into them. Sister Audrey gripped the wheel so hard in those fractions of frozen time that her thumbs simultaneously dislocated. The seat-belt gripped her across the chest, saving her from crushing contact with the steering column.

Sister Mary was dazed by the screaming and the violent lurch of the car. She began to put out her hands when the windscreen exploded in shards of white glass, bursting into the front seats like a bomb. There was a savage jerking force that closed her eyes. The nun felt a giant's fist grasp at her

old heart and stop it in one ferocious coronary. But death was only a pain that seemed to tear at her for an eternity.

Sister Agnes Xavier was, by the blackest of accidents, the first person to die in the multiple crash, though there would swiftly be others following her.

With the bonnet of the Morris Minor colliding with the rear of the toppling Porsche, she shut her eyes instinctively against the sight. Her hands went out to fend off the impact, touching the dashboard. But there was no restraining belt to hold back her seventeen stones and as the collision occurred her bulk began to slide inexorably forwards. Her chubby hands slipped up towards the breaking screen and her head cannonballed downwards.

Towards the six-inch bronze statue of the blessed Saint Christopher, with his staff upraised.

With geometric accuracy the metal pierced her skull. Spearing between the eyes, crushing through skin and flesh and white bone into the frontal lobe of the brain, on into the limbic mode. Pieces of skull were carried into the small wound, each splinter continuing the lethal task of ripping the nun's brain apart. Speech and hearing centres were destroyed first, and Sister Agnes Xavier died deaf and mute.

Last in the procession came the articulated lorry, owned by Jedediah Herneson, the haulage contractor from the beautiful hamlet of Roydon, in Essex. Carrying its illegal cocktail of waste chemicals in the loosely stowed containers. Some of the metal drums were dented and rusting, some showing the streaking of small leaks. Many had their tops barely secured.

Angus Weldon wrestled with the sliding behemoth of a lorry, fighting a battle that was already lost. At the final moment before the tearing collision with the back end of the old Morris Minor he let go and threw himself sideways across the seat to his left, burying his head in his arms.

The cars behind his truck all managed to stop safely, so that the quintuple impact between caravan, coach, Porsche,

Morris and artic was to be the immediate end of the tragic affair.

The big truck crushed in the rear of the little car, squashing the dying Sister Mary to bloodied pulp under the main driving wheels, rolling on as though the Morris was made of thin cardboard. The remains of the sports car were sandwiched between the careening truck and the caravan, pushed to one side, into the dry-stone wall. Then the whole mess of linked metal was sliding down the low bank, ending up in a ditch.

Like most of the ditches and streams in that part of Wales that summer, it was nearly dry. But a thin trickle of water was still flowing among the sun-warmed rocks, barely rippling the brown weeds.

The flurry of sound and movement attracted the eyes of the hawk, and it circled slowly, looping lower towards the sun-dried earth.

The canisters of chemicals came sliding forwards, bursting ropes, shredding the aged tarpaulin. Grinding into the back of the cab, flattening it as they rolled onwards to scatter and burst among the remains of the two cars. As they moved they also flattened the crouching driver. The life of Angus Weldon ended in a second of unbelievable crushing agony, as his body was reduced to a smear of blood, pulped bone and ripped flesh.

His three uneaten Yorkie bars were crushed along with him.

As the drums bounced and rolled several of them split open, sending great plumes of multi-coloured chemicals cascading into the warm air. White and grey, pale pink and dusty orange. A deep iridescent blue, mingling with the ripped metal and disturbed stones. Scattered over the sun-darkened turf, tipping like a rainbow scum on to the surface of the tiny stream.

Petrol gushed from ruptured tanks and a large gas cylinder came bouncing from the torn flank of the tilted

caravan. The coach driver was slumped unconscious over his wheel, while teachers bellowed for calm across the screaming and crying, trying to muster their flock outside as quickly as possible.

The risk of fire was the biggest danger in an accident of that sort.

When flooding petroleum splashes on hot engines and exhausts . . .

Less than five seconds.

Away to the south and east, on the shadowed slopes of the Black Mountain, tucked away into a fold in the rolling land, there lay a small hill farm. A neat, white-painted house, with a large reed-roofed barn and several old out-buildings. With a clean, new concrete shed a few yards away from it.

Hobb's Farm.

The hollow boom of the explosion echoed long and flat, like the blasting in one of the distant quarries. The noise sent the hawk flapping higher in alarm, turning its cruel head to watch what went on below it.

A great plume of sullen black smoke coiled greasily into the blue sky over towards the main Caernarfon road. The man looked up at the noise, wiping perspiration from his brow. He stopped work on sharpening his knife and slid it back into its soft leather sheath.

The knife was in any case very sharp.

Chapter 4

As disasters go, the death toll wasn't all that spectacular.

The papers made much of the fact that three nuns were among the dead. Though it took an awfully long time to identify the remains. For some hours it was thought that there were only two bodies in the smelted remnants of the Morris Minor. The heat of the fire had been so intense and the explosion so violent that the corpses were fused together like blackened greasy logs. It also took a long time before their convent in rural Northamptonshire would agree to release any details of the next of kin for each of the dead Sisters.

Jonny Barton wasn't much missed. The only ripple that his passing caused was among some of his boy friends. Two of whom came together raiding his flat and fought bitterly with kitchen knives until neighbours called the police who came and separated the weeping, bleeding young men.

But his cremation in Fulham was an occasion for the pretty folk of the fashion world to come together and flutter their elegant wings, which at least put Jonny into the pages of several trendy magazines.

The bursting of the cylinder of gas from the caravan in the crash sent jagged splinters of razor-edged metal through the thin walls, killing both the young children.

The only casualty on the coach was also caused by one of those hissing shards of white-hot steel. Several of the children suffered cuts and bruises from the impact of the collision, and many of them were treated for severe shock. But it was the oldest teacher on the trip, Bobby Rogers, Head of Drama at Saint Nicholas, who was struck in the throat by a scything piece of the cylinder no larger than a

baby's finger.

It opened up his jugular and instantly he was twitching and kicking in a welter of his own blood, dead in less than a minute.

Angus Weldon's mutilated body was finally cut free from the flattened, burned wreckage of his cab by the firemen. When they finally arrived. The message wasn't even phoned through to them until a quarter of an hour had passed, and it took them close to an hour to pick their way through the jammed lines of vehicles. By then the worst of the fire was already out and the column of smoke was starting to dissipate on the rising south-westerly wind.

They hosed down the smouldering tangle of metal, dragging out the unrecognizable body of the driver. The heat had melted most of the fat in his body and it was mingled with the plastic of the seat.

Only later still, with the day nearly done, were the fire people and police able to make a serious start on trying to work out precisely what had happened. And what load the artic had been transporting.

The scanty documentation on the lorry's load was all destroyed, and Jedediah Herneson proved to be oddly lacking in information. He told the men who contacted him that Angus had always been a bit of a loner. 'Fuckin' cowboy, know what I mean? Sort of bloke who didn't go in too much for the paperwork side. He'd tried to bring Angus into line. Even threatened him with the sack. 'But, I mean, what the fuck can you do? Eh?'

In the end there was only evidence of three chemicals being carried. But it had been clear from the different drums and containers that remained that there had been at least four other substances on the back of the articulated lorry when it crashed.

But at least they knew about three.

The report that eventually filtered through to the desk of the Ministry official responsible for chemical spillage and pollution was couched in vague generalities, larded with scientific gibberish. There were plenty of warm, reassuring phrases.

'It is believed that the local eco-structure was not damaged. There will be monitoring as per standing instructions over the next twelve months, diminishing as circumstances permit. Fortunately there is no immediate threat to livestock or to crops as the fields where the incident happened are not under any agricultural use.'

They had tested the soil and found no evidence of any damage. The weather had been favourable to the authorities.

'The prevailing wind at the time and day of the above-mentioned incident was light and variable, but well within the acceptable parameters for airborne pollution. Again, the tests which have been carried out have proved negative. The long period of rainless days with high temperatures has reduced a water flow through the irrigation system of ditches and streams to an unusual minimum. Therefore, there can be no possibility of hazard from this form of chemical spread.'

It was all very comforting. The fact that the manifest for the load was missing had been glossed over. The deaths of the nuns and children had been enough for the papers, and nobody had picked up on the possible danger from the spilled and burned and mixed chemicals. Which was good news for everyone.

The report was filed away and forgotten. It had been just one of those things.

Even the scientific details were only skimmed through by a couple of officials, and nobody felt that there was anything to worry about.

'The main chemical identified is Ketamine Hydrochloride. A non-barbiturate anaesthetic, mainly for children. First discovered at Wayne State University in America in 1961 by Doctor Cal Stevens. Grouped with nitrous oxide and

phencyclidine as disassociative anaesthetics.'

There was a footnote to that page. 'Used incorrectly or illegally in the western part of America, there has been evidence of it being taken by young people as a powerful hallucinogenic. It is not easy to control in such cases and has been likened to the notorious "angel dust" by the enforcement authorities.

'Second of the chemicals, carried in the containers coloured orange, marked with the reference PNFA61/63, is the so-called "DMT". We can find no record of how this consignment came into the hands of the haulage contractor, and his own records are grievously incomplete. Note this is to be investigated by the Board of Trade.'

There was another footnote, this time with a code number in the margin indicating the possibility of a security clearance requirement.

'The containers here are believed to have come from the military research establishment at Porton Down. Should there be further queries on this aspect, we suggest applying a restrictive notice on the ground of national security. As usual.'

But they had gone into some detail about the make-up of the DMT.

'Possibly the fastest-acting of all hallucinatory drugs. There are stories of disturbing tendencies towards violence under the influence of this chemical, but this is only under circumstances of ingestion or intravenous assimilation. Obviously neither of those conditions were in evidence in the incident. The substance is N,N-dimethyltryptamine, an indole-based semi-synthetic chemical. Its effects are comparatively short-lived but extremely potent.'

Since the media hadn't shown much interest in the question of the spilled chemicals, there hadn't been any reason to probe further into the way that the substances might or might not combine.

'Third of the identifiable chemicals was an inhibiting agent, rather similar to Neostigmine. An ammonium-carbamyl ester with more than a passing resemblance to Acetylcholine. This is a transmitter which conveys nerve impulses between the parasympathetic system and the involuntary muscle cells which it regulates. It acts in a complex manner that is not yet totally understood by scientists, but it involves enzyme breakage of esteric bondage, releasing ammonium moiety. The continued presence of this transmitter in the body means, in simple terms, that the nerve or muscle cells are promoted into a state of permanent excitement. It may also speed up the heart, respiration and all of the major muscle reflexes.'

All of which meant very little to the official whose responsibility it was to read the report. It seemed that the lorry had been carrying an anaesthetic, an hallucinogenic and something that made the metabolism work faster than usual. Nothing there seemed very dangerous.

There were two factors that should have been considered in the 'incident', and were not. One was that each of these three chemicals might have been fairly harmless on its own, but there had been no experimentation at all on how they might combine.

Secondly, these three were merely the ones that they had managed, eventually, to find out about. Sadly, that knowledge was virtually worthless, as they didn't know what the other drums contained. It was like trying to do a jigsaw puzzle with most of the pieces either blank or missing.

The firemen, when they eventually battled their way to the scene of the accident, found that the remains of the vehicles involved were still smouldering. They had made what checks they could, but time was pressing and there were greater priorities. Dead and injured people, with a whole coach of

shocked children. And the road had to be cleared.

The little stream at the bottom of the slope didn't appear on any of their maps and clearly couldn't be linked to any existing water supply. So they set to and hosed down the mess as best they could.

The mixture of chemicals that they had found didn't seem to be dangerous. None of them appeared to be corrosive or volatile. The grass hadn't been damaged where powders had spilled, and there were no unpleasant vapours being given off.

Some of the people present immediately after the accident commented that there seemed a rather odd smell in the air. A dusty scent that clung to the back of the throat and seemed to coat the tongue, leaving it feeling dry and slightly numb.

But the air was heavy with the smoke of the accident, and it was only a passing sensation. None of them suffered the least ill-effect.

So, nobody was at all worried.

The watery sludge filtered its slow way along the narrow bed of the little stream, coating the stones with a slick, opaque film. Then it vanished into a fern-fringed hole and totally disappeared from the sight of man. Much of the firemen's hosing washed the mingled powders into a hollow in the dry, dusty land, where it was absorbed into the earth and dissipated harmlessly. Probably no more than twenty gallons or so of the multi-coloured, sticky liquid actually found its way into the stream.

The cloud of smoke from the explosion was blown away on the wings of the light wind within minutes, shrinking like the tattered shreds of the Dark Lord of Mordor. By the end of the afternoon on that hot August day there was very little left to be seen.

The traffic had dwindled and breakdown trucks had removed the wrecked vehicles. The dead and the injured had

been whisked away towards Caernarfon, and sand had been laid over the blood and oil and spilled petrol.

The wall was still down, a pile of loose stones jumbled in the field below the road. Council workmen had strung a red cord across the gap, with dangling strips of plastic to warn the unwary.

It was very quiet, with only the gentle sound of the evening breeze through the grass and hedges.

The corpses were laid in plastic bags in the mortuary of the nearest hospital, waiting for positive identification. It had been a nasty business, and it was the lead item in news bulletins normally preoccupied with the problems of the Near and Middle East and the endless saga of union troubles in the North.

It had been a nasty business.

But it was over.

The sludge, almost colourless in normal light, and virtually without taste, moved slowly, helped along for a few minutes by the burst of water from the firemen. A cocktail of chemicals, it followed snaking tunnels, sometimes only a few inches in height, sometimes widening to several feet. Through sullen underground pools, past the wavering gills of pallid, blind fishes. Along the tendril currents of lightless lakes, most of them barren, some teeming with tiny forms of life.

Despite the long dry period of the hot summer, there were still some streams flowing, far underground. Away beneath the endless drought, out of sight of the bustling tourists, water flowed. Under Mynydd Marchnad and the slabs of Moel Cwmdulyn, beloved of generations of rock-climbers from Birmingham and Manchester, and even below the bare summit of Mynydd Du itself, the silent rivers ran in dank caverns of impenetrable blackness.

Inside the chill rocks there was a maze of twining hollows and cisterns. Over the next two and a half days the sludge

came through the mountains. Mile after slow mile it moved. Leaving its infinitesimal traces on rock walls. Traces that would only finally be washed away when the rains came.

By the time the chemicals reached the harsh light of day once more, the accident had disappeared from the minds of most people. There were still the inquest to come and the memorial services. The convent was in mourning with special prayers night and day. And Jed Herneson wasn't sleeping too well, worrying about what further questions might be asked.

But there had been a scandal involving cannabis, a nude model and the son of a Cabinet Minister. So the accident vanished from the public consciousness for ever.

It was very early morning when the sludge came into the bright sun, only a hundred yards or so above the rowan-fringed pond that stood between the squat buildings of Hobb's Farm.

Chapter 5

The mix of spilled chemicals was fractionally lower in specific gravity than the water that carried it. So it floated on top of the meandering stream, greatly diluted, barely one part in fifty thousand. So diffuse now that it would have been an almost impossible task for even the most skilled spectographic analytical chemist to determine precisely what its constituents now were.

Even to the keenest creature, the liquid that now flowed into the pool by the barn on Hobb's Farm had neither taste nor scent.

Three days had drifted by since the catastrophic road accident a few miles away. It had been the overwhelming subject of conversation among the ten people living at Hobb's Farm for the first twenty-four hours, with the radio switched on for every bulletin. The farm was too deep among the lowering crags of Snowdonia for any possibility of television reception without the considerable expense of obtaining a special aerial.

And Paul Thompson, *Doctor* Paul Thompson, had never considered that television ranked very high in importance. Not when it came to money.

Paul was forty-two years old, tall and lean, with eyes of light grey. He had been divorced for nearly five years from a childless and ultimately loveless marriage. Eighteen months ago he'd given up his successful and very remunerative practice in Buckinghamshire, near Chalfont St Giles, investing all of his savings and accumulated capital in the outright purchase of Hobb's Farm. Paul had always loved that part of

Snowdonia, his affection dating back from his membership of the climbing club at Birmingham University, where he'd read medicine.

The move had come as the result of a sudden and utterly apocalyptic decision, reached in less than sixty racing minutes.

Only later did Paul become aware that the sudden decision had, in fact, been fifteen long years in the brewing. The catalyst that took him from a prosperous and comfortable family practice to two hundred acres of scrubby hillside was reading one of John Seymour's excellent books on the prospects and problems of self-sufficiency.

He had been sitting by the blazing logs with it open on his lap, gazing into the tumbling flames. The house had been empty. He no longer asked or cared where his wife Catherine was, or who she was out with. Past worrying even about who she'd be waking up with tomorrow. All that had long drifted away on a sullen tide of taking each other for granted and growing apart.

The day had been hard, he remembered. Hard in that Paul could no longer muster the energy to placate and humour the procession of rich and idle wives who came to his surgery. Seeking some wonder drug that would fill the yawning gaps in their lives for them, and give them a satisfaction that they couldn't even begin to explain to themselves, never mind to him.

And here were these books on how to get away from it all. Not for a holiday. Not just for a spring break in the Dordogne or three weeks scuba-diving in the Bahamas. For good. Leaving the echoing house behind him for ever, and his cold wife. Just as long as you were prepared to work hard and give up some of the so-called material comforts for a while, then Seymour assured you that it really *could* work.

Two hundred acres of desolate wilderness with thirty or so moorland sheep and three docile Guernsey cows. There was also some poultry, pet rabbits, a pair of goats and half a

dozen belligerent geese. Plus the inheritance of a legion of rats that infested the barns and the semi-derelict out-buildings. Paul had made it a priority to purchase two black and white collie pups from the neighbouring farmer on the further side of Mynydd Du. Some twenty or so cats, once domesticated, had run wild around the farm and now constituted a hunting pack of considerable ferocity.

That constituted almost the whole animal life around Hobb's Farm.

Apart from the pigs.

The bulk of Paul's money had gone into the pigs. He had read a lot and finally decided that pigs provided the best investment, as well as being the most interesting to him. There had been a move among the genetic manipulators to produce a pig that could be allowed to roam over hillsides and forage rather like the sheep. Which meant trying to revert to some of the oldest breeds. The *palustris* was the primitive pig that had once lived in ancient Europe, but that strain had died out. The Tamworth was the nearest to it among modern breeds of animal.

But Paul had gone a stage further, plunging in at the deepest of deep ends with an entirely new strain of pig.

Called the Buckland White it was a very large animal, standing unusually tall at the shoulder. Though they would clearly have to be removed at some later period, all of the Bucklands were possessed of recessional tusks, curling over their lips, yellow and savage. All in all they were creatures of uncertain temper and a ferocious appearance, with a large hump of muscle between their shoulders.

But what Paul Thompson liked about them was that the specialist magazines all guaranteed that the Buckland was going to be the breed of the future, cheap to feed, economical to house and with a very high meat-to-cost ratio.

So Hobb's Farm now held one hundred and twenty-seven Buckland Whites – three of them had died in the first day or so. The animals were housed for the time being in four new

linked concrete sheds, where they rarely saw the light of day, being fed and watered by an automatic system, drawing from the stream.

The stream had been one of the great selling-points when Paul had first made the rounds of the local estate agents.

'Never failed, it hasn't, Doctor. Go back three or four generations, and the water has always been there at Hobb's Farm.'

It was still far too early for Paul Thompson to see how his new life was going. There were the immediate signs. He certainly felt happier and fitter than he had ever done before, and there was none of the guilt at abandoning his medical career that colleagues had warned him about. Catherine had been paid off; a gesture that had felt like Sinbad finally shrugging away the clinging limbs of the Old Man of the Sea.

An unexpected advantage of his change in lifestyle was that Paul had succeeded in giving up smoking cigarettes.

But, he would have been the first to admit – and often was – that much of his new happiness stemmed from the new lady in his life.

Not long before he had finally moved from Buckinghamshire to Gwynedd he had met an American writer at one of his brother's parties. Nearly ten years younger than Paul, Helene Rusel was short and vivacious and very pretty. She had produced a surprising bestseller with a militantly feminist novel called *Down A Bit*. Following it with the inevitable successor, *Up A Lot*. Both had hovered in the *New York Times*'s top ten for several weeks, giving her enough money to have bought Hobb's Farm ten times over. And also putting her under pressure to produce book three. She had decided to take a sabbatical year off writing and was spending it, back on the land, with Paul.

He was tall, four inches over six feet, slightly stooped as though he was about to peer over the top of his rimless spectacles. Helene was twelve inches shorter, with thick black hair that remained stubbornly straight, whatever she

tried to do with it. Her eyes were dark brown, set in a face of broad honesty, wearing what seemed to be a permanent California tan. Though Helene actually came from East-side New York.

Since coming to Wales Paul had been working on a heavy beard, dark brown, peppered with grey. A colouring that was matched in his receding hair. His friends had always mocked him for his general air of sunken pessimism and his relationship with the perky American had taken all of them totally by surprise.

All of them except his younger brother, Richard.

The two boys had always been close, with only a year between their ages, and had shared their confidences from earliest childhood. Richard knew that Paul had a romantic and idealistic streak running deep beneath his scholarly exterior. And he was probably the only person in the world who knew that, for several years, his older brother had contributed under a rich variety of pseudonyms to a variety of girly magazines. Mainly short fiction pieces with an occasional fake interview.

Richard was short where Paul was tall; tubby where Paul was verging on the skinny. His skin was soft and pink, and he could probably have gone two or three days without needing a shave. Though as the manager of a bank in Tamworth, in the Midlands, he was extremely careful of his appearance. Almost vain. Paul took after their taciturn father in build, while Richard was much more like their fluttery, blonde mother.

Hobb's Farm was bulging with visitors. Richard was using up his entire four weeks' allowance of holiday all in one go. He was there with his slender wife, Jean, and their two children. Marcus was thirteen and Debbie was nearly twelve. Indeed, her birthday was now only three days away. A fact that was central to her thoughts.

For the first time in nearly five years the brothers had managed to persuade their parents to leave their rundown

Forties semi, north of Birmingham, and come for a short holiday. Richard had driven up to Great Barr a week ago, in his immaculate dark blue Volvo, and Paul had promised to take them back again whenever they wished, using his tax-deductible Range Rover. Despite their initial resistance to the idea, neither of the grandparents was showing the least sign of wanting to finish their summer vacation in the beautiful Welsh mountains.

Alice Thompson was seventy-three, spritely and sharp-tongued, her grey hair tied back in a scraped, severe roll. At first she had been very cautious of meeting Helene Rusel, with an instinctive suspicion of anything and anyone foreign. And she had always felt that marriage, for better or worse, should be for life. But they had finally taken to each other, and the American often accompanied the old lady on her morning strolls down the winding path to the further edge of the fields.

Edwin Thompson was two years older than his wife, his height now shortened by a severe stoop. His sight was also poor and his hearing was failing. He sometimes found it difficult to keep up his spirits under the affliction of rheumatoid-arthritis. Despite gold injections and a partial hip-joint replacement he was virtually bed-bound. Paul was able to help his father down the steep stairs of the old farm-house, and Richard assisted in getting him back to bed again in the evening.

But for most of the time Edwin sat in a deep armchair, gazing out through the window towards the shadowy bulk of the Black Mountain, beyond the fringed pool.

The numbers at Hobb's Farm were made up to ten by the taciturn manager, Arthur Pentecost, and his daughter, Gwyneth. Pentecost had once owned a similar farm just outside Nefyn, on the north coast of the Lleyn Peninsula, but had run into crippling financial problems. Problems that had worsened and had culminated with his younger wife leaving him and disappearing totally from the face of the

earth. The police were involved and put Arthur through three days of probing interrogations. But he simply and stubbornly stuck to his story that he had seen her when he left to go to market in the morning and when he came home she was gone. Not a single soul had seen her leave the farm.

There was an extensive search involving the lifeboat from Porth Dinllaen and a helicopter from the RAF base on Anglesey. A week later a holidaymaker found Brenda Pentecost's fawn coat and scuffed white shoes on a narrow cliff path, near the village of Tudweilog, half-hidden in some ferns.

But no-one ever came forward to admit to having seen her making that last walk along the isolated shore, and no body was ever found. After the statutory period, Brenda was declared officially dead.

Gwyneth had suffered a kind of breakdown, and refused to admit that her mother had drowned. Insisting that she had simply gone off and was alive somewhere, perhaps suffering from some sort of memory failure.

The girl was now sixteen, with a precociously developed body and an even more precocious mind. During the summer she wore a skimpy t-shirt, blazoned with the message 'Just Ask'. Alternating it with an even tighter one that carried the provocative words 'Sit On A Happy Face'.

She had cut her jeans off so high on the leg that she constantly revealed the soft folds of her buttocks as she walked. Gwyneth made sure that both Paul and Richard were well aware of her ample charms, using every pretext to lean or brush against them. She had annoyed Alice by several times sitting on Edwin's lap while he was in the armchair. And she only had to appear in a room for poor young Marcus to blush bright crimson. A reaction that she enjoyed and fostered by whispering lewd suggestions in his ear every time that she found him alone.

He wasn't sure at all whether he loathed or worshipped Gwyneth. But she now featured in a confused way at the

centre of all his panting masturbatory fantasies.

Hobb's Farm was a nice place. The house was clean, the buildings orderly and the stock docile and well-tended. Paul Thompson considered himself lucky to have found it, and even more lucky that in Helene he'd found a woman who was prepared to come and share it with him. He didn't mind at all having his parents down to stay, and he was delighted that Helene and his mother had struck up such a firm friendship. But he found Jean Thompson's often repeated enthusiasm for the holiday was forced and false. He had never quite understood his younger brother's choice of a wife, and he confided to Helene that he felt Jean would have been far happier lying on a striped plastic sun-lounger at the side of some Majorcan hotel pool.

He was using the point of his long, narrow-bladed knife to scrape out the bowl of his pipe, the evening after the crash. Browsing through a leaflet on the care and feeding of the modern pig, he read out the list of chemicals and additives that are needed.

'Iodine, Sodium, Potassium, Iron, Chlorine, Calcium, Phosphorus and Copper. And Vitamins A, D and E. And a good supply of clean water for them to drink. Pigs will not take to fouled water.'

'Sounds more like a chemistry lesson to me. Why not just feed them scraps like they used to when I was a kid?'

'Pigs, on East Seventy-eighth? Come on, Helene.'

'You would be surprised at the wildlife of New York, Paul.'

'Alligators in the sewers, you mean.'

She grinned at him. 'Could be. But I figure we don't make enough scraps for one hundred of those bastards out there.

'They are not bastards, Helene. They are Buckland Whites. The pig of yesterday and the pig of tomorrow.'

'Still not the best business.'

'What is?'

'Hooking.'

'How's that better?'

She assumed a stage-Jewish accent. 'First you got it. Then you sell it. Then you still got it. That's what I call good business.'

'Not much call for prostitutes up on a Welsh hill farm, though,' he said, smiling at her joke. Conscious, as he was many times a day, of how lucky he was to have found someone like Helene.

He got up from their bed and walked across the low ceilinged room to bend and stare through the window, out past the yard, to the neat row of new sheds. Inside it he knew that his beloved Bucklands would be settling down for sleep, boars, weaners and sows separated by stout partitions.

'Incidentally, Helene, did you hear dear Jean moaning about the smell again today?'

'The pigs? Screw her, Paul.' She was brushing her thick hair, sitting on the far side of the bed. Wearing only a sweater and pale blue silk bikini pants. He watched her, feeling a sudden swelling of lust for her. He put down his pipe on the small table under the window.

'Yes. She said that it spoiled the taste of the clean mountain air.'

They both laughed at that. The quiet sharing of a private joke between a couple who understand each other.

'Better dump them down the tubes, then, love. Or maybe install a deodorant in their pens. Eau de hog-sty. Get them to use vaginal douches. Jean'd really like that idea.'

Paul nodded. 'Still, I doubt they'll stay here much longer. I know Mum and Dad planned on no longer than a fortnight here.'

Helen stood up and stretched, cat-like, peeling off her fawn sweater, shaking her head to free her hair. Paul heard the delicate crackle of static electricity from her. Looking at her breasts, watching them jiggle with the movement. He

was aware that his erection was pressing uncomfortably against the front of his jeans and he surreptitiously tried to ease himself. But she saw him.

'I thought you were supposed to have gotten real tired after a day's work. That sure doesn't look tired to me, pilgrim,' pointing an accusing finger at the disobedient swelling in his groin.

'Being with you is something of a tonic for an old-timer like me, Helene.'

'Old goat, more like.'

'Helene,' he declaimed. 'Fortifies the over-forties.'

'In a minute or so, honey, I'll be reaching the parts that other mistresses never get to even see.'

'Love you,' he breathed.

She came and stood by him, suddenly dropping to her knees on the worn strip of carpet. 'Like Bob Seger said about taking away my solitude and my inhibitions . . . You liberated a lonely lady, Paul, and I guess you know it, too.'

Her fingers butterflied across the tops of his thighs, easing down the zip on his Levis. He felt coolness as she reached inside his briefs and slid out his penis, running her tongue up and down the engorged length of the shaft. Her eyes were closed.

Paul stroked the back of her neck, tangling his fingers into her hair, pulling her closer in towards his body.

She moved back for a moment. 'Mmmm, that's real nice, love,' she said. Looking up at him, her lips slightly parted. 'Want me to slide the bolt across on the bedroom door, 'fore we get committed?'

'No. There won't be anyone around now. Kids are in their room with the cassette player. Mum and Dad are playing crib in the kitchen. Dick and Jean have gone for a walk down to the bridge. I saw Arthur and Gwyneth going to check the feed in the pens. Just you and me, blue-eyes. Just you and me.'

'You aren't going to do the bit where I have to say about

whistling and then you say about opening my mouth and blowing, are you?'

'Just get to it, there's a good girl.'

'Patronisin' bastard. Anyway, what is *it*?' she asked, innocently, pressing against his thighs so that he could feel her nipples peaking against him.

'It, my Transatlantic lover, is right on the tip of your tongue. Or should be.'

'God damn, but you're so masterful, Doctor Thompson,' she whispered, cupping his balls softly in the palm of her right hand. Squeezing so that he gasped in anticipated shock. She flicked her tongue over the end of his penis and then dropped her head so that almost the entire length slid into her mouth.

'Hey, you're good,' he hissed.

'I know,' she said, voice muffled and barely audible. 'When I was in Tijuana I'd get maybe fifteen cents each time I did this.'

After it was over she wiped her chin with a tissue. Climbing on the bed and lying down, arching her hips towards Paul. Licking her lips expectantly. He could see that the vee of her knickers was already moist with her own ready excitement.

'My turn now, Paul,' she said.

'I know. Give me a couple of minutes to reassemble my breathing.'

'Thank you for coming,' she grinned.

'Thank you for having me,' he replied. It was an old joke between them, dating from the very earliest days of their relationship.

Their bedroom light was the last to go off in the house. But they weren't the last to get to sleep. Gwyneth Pentecost lay restless on her bed, plagued with thoughts of both of the Thompson brothers making love to her at once. One with his

cock plunged deep into her, hands gripping her by the shoulders, licking her breasts. While the other delicately probed between her gaping jaws with his own prick, his hands holding her head steady. After they would change places and she would taste them on her tongue.

Gwyneth had been taken often enough by local boys from the nearest village, but she was an assiduous reader of novels and knew that there was supposed to be more to it than that. More than a quick fumble at her tits and then maybe a hand rubbing clumsily inside her Marks and Spencer's knickers. Fifteen seconds thrusting and panting, and then finished, their bodies slumping heavily on top of her with their breath in her face.

There had to be a lot more to it than that, and Gwyneth Pentecost guessed that it might take an older, more experienced man to show her how. And she was certain that both Paul and Richard would do it for her. Specially Richard. He was more . . . more cuddly.

The thought of both men doing things that she had only read about was pleasant to the girl. And her doing things back for them. She'd tried to get Morgan from the little Post Office to let her do it like that for him, but he had been shocked. Said that it was dirty and slapped her across the face.

In her attic room, Gwyneth lay flat on her back, knees raised, thighs a little way spread. There was only a single sheet across her naked body. In the sweltering heat of the short summer night she relaxed, allowing her fingers to brush lazily against her damp, secret places, mouth falling open, breath coming faster.

If her father had come in and seen her! In the stillness she giggled at the idea. Wondering what he might do. The thought making her fingers move faster.

There had been an advice column that she had read, in one of the pile of women's magazines that Jean Thompson had brought back with her from a day's shopping in Caernarfon.

A letter from a worried teenage reader asking about touching yourself. Whether it was harmful. Whether it could make you go deaf or blind. Become infertile. Or even start to grow small hairs in the palms of your hands so that everyone would know your secret vice! The magazine was reassuring, saying that it was natural, and not harmful at all. And it was so nice.

Very, very nice . . .

During the night the water in the farm's pond was topped up by the reliable stream from beneath Mynydd Du. It trickled silently and slowly all night long, over the mud and worn stones. Past the tangling roots of the ancient rowan trees.

From the fronded pool it was syphoned into the various troughs and pipes that supplied the drinking needs of all of the animals in and around Hobb's Farm.

Not for the humans.

They took their water from a large metal container, set into the hillside a little behind the house, filled up by a large tanker that came struggling up the steep track every two or three weeks.

The water from the stream finally reached the long polished troughs of the pigs, seeping along glittering pipes, past dials and gauges that controlled the flow. And the Bucklands came to drink in the artificial light that gleamed dimly. It was never bright inside the concrete sheds. And never dark, either.

They drank from the troughs, humped shoulders dipping, muzzles gouging at the water, their savage tusks gleaming yellow.

It seemed that the addition of the spilled chemicals made no difference. There was no taste and no smell. And all of the creatures of Hobb's Farm, great and small, drank of them

Chapter 6

'And the new Fun Boy Three album, Mummy. Don't forget that.'

Jean was busily slicing bread in the tiled kitchen. 'I'm not really sure that the Fun Boy Three have reached this part of Wales, dear. More like "Men of Harlech" and folk songs all about burning down honest English people's cottages.'

'But it was on my list.'

'Don't whine, dear. Anyway, wasn't it the Fun Boy Three that had that perfectly beastly song on one of their long players about a little boy being assaulted by one of his teachers on a school camping holiday?'

'It was a trip to France, Mummy.'

'Yes, dear.' Debbie's mother reached out with a hand smeared with marmalade and turned on the little transistor radio that stood on a shelf beneath the kitchen window.

'I suppose it's not important, anyway. I mean . . . it's only my birthday,' said the girl, pulling a face at her brother.

'Birthy-wirthy for Debbie-webby,' he teased, leaning back just in time to avoid a pettish slap at his face from a round-arm swing.

'Mummy . . .'

'She started it.'

'Didn't.'

'Did!'

'Didn't!!'

'God! Shut up, both of you,' snapped Jean. Turning the dial on the radio, trying to pick something out of the usual mess of crackling static that flooded the bright room. The sun was streaming in from the shaded valley to the east, dazzling her. The after-effects of last night's sleeping tablets

were still clouding her eyes and mind and she felt depressed and vaguely sick.

From the prickling in her sinuses and behind her nose she guessed that the pollen on the dry hillsides was going to be exceptionally high again, provoking her hay-fever. The nearest chemist had shrugged apologetically. He hadn't been able to obtain her usual brand of anti-histamine pills, and Paul hadn't been able to help either.

'Mum?'

'What is it, Marcus?'

'Can we go out and try to find where that big crash was, please?'

'No.'

'Please,' echoed her daughter.

'No. It's ghoulish.'

'What's that mean?'

The sickness was stronger and she wished that the children would just go away and leave her on her own for a bit. 'It means being morbid about dead people and all things like that.'

Debbie poked her brother on the arm. 'Like Marcus when our guinea-pigs both died and he dug them up to see if they'd rotted.'

'You haven't fed your rabbits,' retorted the boy. 'Has she, Mum?'

'I don't . . .' A burst of gabbling French came ripping from the transistor and she quickly turned down the volume control. 'No. I don't think she has. Go and do them straight after breakfast.' She corrected herself. 'No. Do your face and teeth after, *then* feed your rabbits.'

'Do I have to have All-Bran this morning, Mummy?' sighed Marcus.

'Depends.'

'Went last night. Honest.'

'He did, Mummy,' grinned his sister. 'Pooh! You could smell it all the way to the pig-sty. In fact I thought that the

smell was . . .'

'Debbie! That'll do. All right, Marcus. Just have some fruit, though. I'm tryin' to get the weather forecast and the news. It's nearly eight. Debbie, go and tell your father that his eggs are done.'

'Oh, bumzarelli,' she moaned.

'And don't use that horrible word, Debbie. You know how it upsets Granny and Grandad.'

'It's only a joke word. Made-up, Mum,' protested her son, coming unexpectedly to his sister's defence.

'Oh, for God's sake go away and eat your breakfasts in your own room. I'm sick of both of you. Ah, there is it at last,' as the urbane voice of the BBC announcer came faintly from the radio.

'The further outlook is more of the same. Good news for all those lucky people on holiday and not so good for the farmers and for the reservoirs. But I have good news for them. Or what might be good news in a few days.'

'Rain,' sighed Jean as the children left the kitchen, still jostling and provoking each other.

'There is the first sign of a possible, and I stress the word *possible*, break in the situation. Satellite pictures out in the Atlantic show the build-up of a cold front, moving easterly towards us. At present it's off the coast of Canada, near Newfoundland, but moving fast on the jet-stream, it could be with us within two to three days.'

Jean glanced through the window, her eyes attracted by movement, seeing Arthur Pentecost walking slowly past. She half-raised a hand to wave to him, but the farm manager studiously ignored her and she allowed her hand to fall to her side.

'Miserable bugger,' she whispered.

He disappeared, carrying a galvanized bucket of water in each hand. Probably going to the Guernseys. For the sheep he would have used the hose connected to the stone run-off from the pond.

'It is possible that some light rain might reach Ireland and extreme westerly parts of Wales and some regions of northern England some time the day after tomorrow. Sorry I can't be more specific but the progress of this kind of front is likely to be erratic. Anyway, that's the end of the weather forecast this morning.'

Jean Thompson tried to recall how long it had been since they'd seen rain. Licking her dry lips at the thought of the cool, green mistiness that she knew would sweep across the heathered slopes of Snowdonia. Debbie appeared, holding a large cream china bowl. Walking towards the pool at the centre of the yard.

The radio was carrying on with its morning business. Upstairs she could hear her husband stirring. Blundering about their bedroom. If he didn't get a move on then his scrambled eggs would be cold and greasy. It crossed her mind to call up and warn him, but she felt she couldn't be bothered. The thought of the congealing eggs made her feel more nauseous and she swallowed hard to help it pass away again.

'. . . where her father, Richard Jakes, is dangerously ill.'

She watched Debbie, stooping and filling the bowl with water for her rabbits. She was growing up; growing pretty. Jean looked on, proudly, smiling at the delicate way her daughter wiped her hands down her jeans to dry them. She was about to rap on the window, warning her not to put her hands in her mouth after touching the slime-tinted water. Paul and Richard had both said that it wouldn't do any harm, but she wasn't about to take that chance.

'Now it's eight o'clock, and here's the news read by . . .'

Debbie saw her mother watching and scampered towards the kitchen, calling out. 'Got any greens for Thumper and Bambi, Mummy?' Adding as an afterthought. 'Please?'

'Some cabbage stalks. Here.' Opening the window with the worn iron latch and handing them through to the eager girl. 'Now you go and feed them. And leave them the water.

Enough for the day. Go back at dinner-time and you can give them some lettuce. All right, Debbie?'

'Dinner-time?' asked the girl.

'Yes. Shoot off and play this morning and then feed them *before* you eat yourself.'

Marcus called from the stairs. 'What's for dinner, Mum?'

'You don't think of anything but food. The only time you ever speak to me is when you ask what's for breakfast or dinner or supper.'

'And afters,' he added, appearing in the kitchen with a cheeky grin.

'Well, it's burgers and chips and beans.'

'Afters?'

Jean shook her head. 'Oh, Marcus. If I strangled you there's no jury on earth would convict me. It's ice-cream, I expect.'

From the open window she was able to watch another facet of Hobb's Farm. Helene Rusel and Alice Thompson were taking their morning's constitutional together, the American writer steadying the arm of the old lady. As they vanished through the yard, skirting the pond, heading for the path across the fields, they were talking animatedly.

'Like a couple of wrens,' said Jean, not even aware that she'd spoken out loud.

It was a very ordinary kind of morning down on the farm.

The hinges had been sticking on the food mixing-hopper in the biggest of the pig-sheds. Paul poked at them with the point of his favourite knife, freeing them from the obstructing lumps of dried gruel. He breathed heavily as he worked at it, trying not to inhale too deeply. Though he had been used to the stench of dying when he had worked as a doctor, the smell of one hundred and twenty-seven Buckland Whites crowded together on a sweltering summer day was something else.

Finally, he managed to get them free again, seeing the pencilled note that he'd written on the wall of the shed, by the hopper. When first he'd started keeping the pigs.

'4.5 litres to 2.5 kgs,' it said.

The proportions of water to feed. Vital to maintain the balance. There were so many things to remember about pigs. When to feed and how much to feed. Additives. When to mate. Keeping the sexes and ages apart. When to castrate the weaners. When to breed the gilts. Watching for the various awesome range of illnesses and diseases that pigs are prone to. Anaemia, Mange, Lice, Wasting, Transmissable Gastro-Enteritis, Sunstroke, Swine Fever, Farrowing Fever - the list seemed endless.

There were some empty sacks scattered on the floor of the shed and Paul reminded himself to ask Dick's children if they'd lend a hand in tidying-up. 'Rank Hovis McDougall; Kwik Meat Gold Pellets.'

He straightened himself to his full height, wiping the sweat from his forehead. Running a hand through the straggling grey hair. When Dick had first come for the holiday, Paul had hoped that his younger brother might be able to help out around the farm. But Richard Thompson was not the physical type. Chubby, and soft. The job of bank manager was too sedentary and any exertion brought him out in a rash and made his flabby chest shudder with the mere effort of drawing breath.

Paul stood in the artificial light, listening. It was almost like being inside some huge, slumbering beast, though he was hardly fanciful enough to make the connection. There was the constant soft scuffling of the Bucklands as they moved restlessly about their small pens. They had heard him come in, and they could scent him. It had quieted them. But they were only waiting. Food trickled and rattled along the pipes of the automatic feeding system, and he heard the gurgling from the chrome and plastic tubes as the water flowed to their troughs from the pond in the yard.

He tried to recall the percentages of protein, fibre and oil in the feed. It was important with the gilts to give them plenty of protein. John Seymour's book had stressed the dangers of rushing into a programme of self-sufficiency without proper thought and planning and Paul Thompson had taken that advice to heart.

'Seventeen point five protein. Five per cent fibre and four per cent oil. No. Three point five per cent oil. Yes, that's it.'

It was important to get things like that right, so that his Buckland Whites would turn out large and healthy and financially rewarding.

He noticed that the pigs had been drinking about a third more of the water than usual. Doubtless because of the heat-wave that still persisted. Jean had said something that morning about hearing the weather forecast that mentioned the chance of a break coming in the long, hot, dry spell.

'Be welcome,' he said, his voice flattening and disappearing along the sheds. If the water ever dried up and failed, then he would face almost immediate ruin. All of his calculations were based on the tanker delivering water only for the humans on the farm, and if he needed to use some of that for the livestock then it would upset all of his careful planning.

The tanker was, in fact, due that very morning.

The tanker, in fact, never came that morning.

The day wore on and there was neither sight nor sound of the heavy diesel truck labouring up the steep lane from the main road, over the narrow wooden bridge that shook and rattled even when the Range Rover travelled across it.

Richard Thompson sent the children down as far as the end of the lane to watch for the lorry, but they came back just before lunch, panting and quarrelsome, reporting no sign of it.

'How long before we run out, Paul?' asked Richard, washing his pale hands at the sink in the kitchen.

'Oh, a couple of days at the least.'

'You should get on the phone, Paul,' said Helene, walking in, looking at the two brothers together by the window.

'Yes. Get connected,' urged Jean. 'Jolly inconvenient not being on the phone.'

Paul wiped his own hands dry. Long, capable fingers, the nails neatly trimmed. Looking as if he was about to go into the operating theatre. 'Costs a fortune, Jean. Nearest line is three or four miles away from here, towards the village. I'd have to pay to have it run all the way up here. Cost a bomb.'

'Upset the profit and loss account,' teased Jean, turning from the stove where a pan filled with circular patties of meat sizzled and smoked.

'It would, Jean, and it's not a joking matter, either,' retorted Paul. With more of a snap to his voice than he'd really intended. Catching Helene's eye and biting his lip. Realizing his mistake in the uncomfortable silence that followed. 'Sorry about snapping like . . . Maybe the driver of the water-truck doesn't fancy that bridge.'

The American grinned at his clumsy effort to change the subject. But still she backed him up. 'I don't blame him if he doesn't fancy it. It's like playing Russian roulette but with only one chamber empty. You know damned well I nearly wet my pants every time I have to go across it.'

'Not in front of the children, honey,' he said, unruffled by her teasing.

'The children aren't here. Where are they, Jean?' asked Richard.

The two grandparents came into the kitchen in time to hear the question. Though Edwin needed to have it repeated.

'The kiddies? I seen 'em come up from the road. Half hour back. Pushin' at each other like cat and dog. Squabblin' an' all like a cage of monkeys. Need a good hidin', both of 'em.'

'Oh, there's no spite in them, Dad,' replied Alice Thomp-

son, nudging her husband with her bony elbow. 'Kiddies is kiddies. More trouble than a barrel of rats, but no spite in them.'

'One of them blessed geese went for little Marcus as he run by 'em,' said Edwin, carrying on as though his wife hadn't even spoken.

'Went for him, Grandad?' exclaimed Jean, nearly dropping the red-handled spatula in her surprise.

'Well, those geese can be a bit spiteful,' admitted Paul. 'But I don't think they'd do any real harm. They're not very fast.'

'Nearly had him on the thigh,' insisted the old man, settling himself at the table, sighing with the effort. The kitchen was the largest room in the whole house, and doubled as a dining-room with a long refectory table down one wall where they could all eat. Jean had already laid out the cutlery before starting to cook.

Edwin picked up a knife and peered moodily at it, taking out a voluminous white cambric handkerchief and wiping furiously at it. Helene caught Paul's eye and they both smiled.

'So, where are they now?' pressed Helene, filling up the glasses from the tap over the sink.

'They'll be along. Hey, go a bit easy with that water, love,' said Paul. 'The tanker hasn't been and we don't have an awful lot left in the . . .' he hesitated, the word he wanted having momentarily vanished from his lips.

'Receptacle,' suggested his brother.

'All right. Receptacle. Just don't guzzle too much. I can't say I fancy drinking from that pool out there.'

Alice was sipping at her water. 'Oh, I thought you said that water in the pond wasn't dangerous, Paul.'

'It's not. Not dangerous. But it's pretty muddy.'

Jean suddenly sighed. 'Course.'

'What?'

She shook her head at her husband. 'Course. I know

where the children are. The food's nearly ready. Could one of you go outside and give them a call?'

'What about Gwyneth and Pentecost?' asked Richard Thompson.

'Packed lunch. Both gone to mend a fence up on the north side.'

Richard shook his head. 'I don't know why you need a fence around this place. Extra outlay and that must jeopardize cash flow and liquidity.'

'Fences make for good neighbours.'

'But it's like a bloody fortress, anyway.'

'How come?' asked Paul, unable to conceal the note of irritation in his voice.

A note that communicated itself to Jean. 'Oh, pack it in you two. Anyway, dinner's ready. Did anyone call those kids in? It'll spoil.'

'I'll go and get them,' said Helene. 'Where did you say they were?'

'I didn't. But I remembered that I told Debbie to go and feed Bambi and Thumper before she came in for her dinner. There's some lettuce gone, so I think that must be where they are.'

The American nodded and went out through the back door, pausing as the strong sunlight struck her. Feeling the heat of early afternoon through the thin cotton blouse she wore.

Behind her, the brothers were still engaged in their argument.

'Fortress!'

'Come on, Richard. The sheep and cattle would get out if there wasn't either fencing or the dry-stone walls around the place.'

'I've walked, Paul, all around this farm. Apart from the lane and the bloody rickety bridge, anyone would have to be pretty athletic to find any other way out.'

'Not that you are the most athletic of men, Dick, are you?'

'Just because I don't look like a human beanpole . . .'

'Now, boys, boys!' snapped their mother. 'Leave it be, now.'

'You can walk across the fields,' said Paul, determined to have the last word.

But Richard Thompson simply raised an eyebrow at his older brother. The sort of look that he reserved at the bank for any customer who had defaulted on his overdraft, but had sworn that somehow everything would be all right 'next month'.

Outside the kitchen they could hear Helene's New York twang as she called to the children. Jean was already starting to dole out the food on the ranged plates.

'Debbie! Marcus!! Come on you guys. The food's on the table.'

Richard helped his father slowly to his seat at the side of the long table. Alice walked to her place opposite. Paul stood and peered out of the window.

'I suppose that Hobb's Farm is a bit cut off,' he admitted, grudgingly.

'A bit! Come on, Paul. Since I've been here I think I've hiked every one of your two hundred acres. And it's bloody beautiful, too.'

'Language,' muttered Alice Thompson, reproachfully.

'Beautiful, all right,' continued her younger son. 'But the borders are almost all sheer drops or cliffs or precipices dropping to ravines or to dry stream beds. It *is* like a bloo . . . like a fortress.'

It was largely true.

Hobb's Farm stood on a large natural plateau, with steep slopes falling away from it on every side. Even the bridge that linked it with the world outside threaded over a ravine that was at least a hundred feet in depth. Any agile man or woman, or child, could have managed to scramble away from the farm in good light and good weather. But it would have been markedly hazardous to attempt any route apart

from the road and bridge in darkness, rain or fog.

'Marcus! Debbie!! Chow's up, kids. Come and get it. Come on!'

'Where are them kids?' asked Edwin Thompson, pettishly, plucking at the edge of a paper napkin that his wife had laid across his waistcoat.

'They'll be here, Dad,' replied Richard. 'Why don't you get started?'

'What?' cupping a lined hand to his good ear.

'I said why don't we all get started. They won't be a minute.'

His wife backed him up. 'Yes. All sit down and let's get started. If it's spoiled then it's their own fault, isn't it.'

Before they could begin eating they heard the first of the screams.

The noise rose to a piercing crescendo of shock and pain. Rising and falling.

'Debbie,' gasped Jean.

The screaming went on and on.

And on.

Chapter 7

Despite having abandoned medicine some months ago, Paul Thompson had kept up a reasonable stock of supplies at the house. Plasters and bandages and various unguents and vials. Several kinds of drugs, including sedatives and a few tranquillizers.

It was all kept in a large, compartmented chest under the bed in the room he shared with Helene. An excellent first-aid kit, including even his old set of surgical instruments; needles, scalpels, knives, forceps. He sometimes joked that if he was pressed he could do everything from delivering a baby to getting Boy Scouts out of horses' hooves!

He came down the stairs a little after one o'clock that same afternoon, wiping his hands with a spotless white towel, carrying the red initials of a local hospital back where home used to be. He grimaced at his brother who was sitting in the parlour, smoking his pipe.

'Sleeping now, Dick. Best leave her alone until around sixish. Let her rest 'til then. Been a damned nasty experience for her.'

The accident had accentuated the differences between the brothers.

Paul had been calm and controlled, immediately taking charge of things with speed and efficiency. Richard had teetered on the edge of panic, wringing his pudgy fingers and bustling about with all the purpose of a headless chicken.

Now he had calmed himself with a generous slug of Paul's best whisky from the sideboard.

'Been a nasty experience for all of us. Want a drink, Paul? No?'

'Yes, I will. Small one, though. Still got an afternoon's work to do.'

'Course,' hurrying and pouring out a drink. Handing it to his brother with fingers that still trembled from the shock. 'Who would have thought it, though? Eh? Who would have thought it?'

Paul nodded, settling himself with a sigh in one of the floral-patterned chairs. 'Yes. I suppose it could have been the heat making them turn like that.'

Richard watched his older brother knock the drink back in one gulp. 'Another?'

'Sod it! Why not, Dick? Make it a vodka. Double. Even a treble if you can carry it.'

'Sure. It was a shock, though. Really was. You know that Dad was the only one to eat his lunch? Sitting there munching away surrounded by seven congealing plates of burgers and beans. Made me sick.'

Paul took the fresh glass and sipped at it, resting it on his knees. Sighing. 'Ah, that's better. Really hit the spot as Mum would say.'

'Suppose you're used to the blood and all?'

'Yes. You never get quite used to it when it's someone you know. Relation. Friend. Like with her. Where's everyone else gone?'

Richard leaned back and ticked them off on his fingers. Numbers. That was something he knew about and could cope with. Not like ripped flesh and streaming blood.

'Pentecost and the junior harlot are still out in the fields. Jean said that she'd find 'em and tell them about the accident. She's taken Marcus and Mum and Helene all out for a stroll together. She said they'd be back in around an hour.' He sighed, echoing his brother. 'God, but it *is* bloody hot, Paul. And you think that it might have been the heat that . . . ?'

'Said I didn't know. Just a thought, that was all. It took

eleven stitches in her right arm. Really deep, some of those bites. Could even have opened up an artery in the wrist if it'd gone deeper. Another six stitches in her other hand. Three in her lip. I suppose she was kissing the bloody animal.'

'I'll break both their necks, Paul. They obviously aren't safe.'

'Come on, Dick. Don't talk like that. Can't butcher a pair of rabbits because of this. One of those things. She won't have any scars at all. Heal clean. And if you're going to kill Bambi and Thumper then Debbie might never forgive you. Leave real scars, that could. I tell you, Dick, it's one of those things.'

'Suppose some of the other stock starts running out of control? Going wild?'

Paul drained his glass and looked longingly at the sideboard, with the vodka bottle standing on it. A cool shaft of afternoon sunlight lanced across the room, spearing the bottle through its centre, splitting into a hundred dazzling rays.

'Never heard of it,' he replied, 'I know that cows can get fairly bloody-minded when gad-flies plague them in summer. Watch out for when their tails stick out and they all keep charging about. Pigs can get a bit ferocious, but you've seen for yourself how safe they are. Better than a maximum security jail, snugly locked and bolted and barred.'

His brother nodded his agreement. Putting down his glass and steepling his fingers together. 'Yes. Yes, I suppose so. But . . . it wasn't half a shock, Paul, seeing that poor little mite all slobbered with blood, running screaming across the yard like that.'

Despite the work he knew he should be doing, Paul Thompson decided that another drink wouldn't be out of order. There was already a pleasant feeling creeping over him, and the warmth of the afternoon was lulling him. He rose from the chair and helped himself.

The vodka sloshed into the crystal tumbler, and Paul

stood there for a few moments, looking out across the farm through the window. *His* farm. The whole two hundred acres of it was his, signed, sealed and collected.

The catch on the window was broken, and he fumbled with it, letting in a draught of cooler air. Or maybe it just seemed cooler against the stuffiness of the parlour.

One of the things that Paul had noticed about his father, since he'd become virtually bedbound, was that the old man was taking less care about his personal hygiene. And Alice had never been keen on bathing him. That was the musty smell that hung in the room.

The window rattled open.

Four geese were dozing at the edge of the pond, under the shade of the stunted rowans, one of them dipping its beak lazily into the weed-fringed border, throwing back its head and long muscular neck as it drank. The sound disturbed them and all four started simultaneously, heads swivelling to stare straight at Paul as he stood immobile behind the glass.

'Christ!'

'What is it?' asked his brother, worriedly.

Paul laughed. With a touch less conviction then he'd intended. 'I don't know, Dick, but I must admit those geese sometimes give me the willies. Specially after Debbie's rabbits.'

As he moved away from the window, still clutching his tumbler of vodka, the geese all turned back again, as though they'd forgotten his presence.

Arthur Pentecost was repairing the fence at the top end of the farm, highest up the slopes of the mountain. Helped in an idle, negligent manner by his only child, Gwyneth. The sun baked down from an unbroken dome of bright blue, heat-haze shimmering over the tops of the highest peaks to the south and east of the land. The girl had taken off her

t-shirt, complaining that it was making her nipples sore, but her father had immediately insisted that she put it on again.

'But they hurt, Pa. Maybe I should ask Mister Paul to look at them for me. Him bein' a doctor and all, Pa? Eh?'

'Just keep your bloody lips buttoned and help me with this bloody fence. Or it's the back of my hand you're goin' to feel across your chops, girly.'

'Hit me like you used to hit Mam, is it Dad?' she retorted, making sure that she was several steps out of range, knowing from bitter and painful experience that Arthur Pentecost had fast and heavy fists. Richard Thompson had caught him slapping her around only a week earlier and taken him angrily to task for it.

'Hit your Ma! I never touched her.'

'Liar! I heard you, night after night. Comin' home pissed from the pub and layin' into her. No wonder she went and left you.'

'She was ill. Real ill in the mind, like. You know that, Gwyneth.'

'She ran away.' Raising her voice in the summer stillness. 'Probably got herself a real nice fancy-man, my Mam has. One day, when she's all settled, she'll send for me and I'll go like she done.'

'Oh, will she? Well, if your Mam sends for you it'll be . . .'

'What?'

'Nothing, Gwyneth,' as if he regretted rising to her baiting. 'Just hold your chatter.'

He relapsed into a sullen silence, knowing that the girl had once again beaten him in the running skirmishing of their relationship. Arthur carried on painstakingly plaiting the barbed wire round and round the post, fencing off the steep drop so that none of the sheep or cattle should wander.

One of the patient Guernseys was standing watching

them, only twenty paces off, its jaws moving rhythmically. With half a dozen of the sheep around it, their eyes all fixed on him and on the girl.

'Bugger off!' he shouted, suddenly angry at their attention, throwing a rounded, sun-warmed stone from the grass near his feet. Hitting the nearest of the sheep on the flank with a dull thunking sound. To his passing surprise none of the animals reacted as he'd anticipated, looking for them to flee immediately. But there was a distinct pause of four or five heartbeats before they turned tail and scampered off across the brow of the hill, followed at a more sedate pace by the cow.

Arthur shook his head, but thought no more of it, carrying on with his endless task of fencing, watched by his sullen daughter, sitting cross-legged on the grass, picking her nose.

Helene Rusel decided to go and take a look at the rabbits for herself.

The American had been the first to see Debbie Thompson as the girl ran screaming down the hill from the hutch, blood seeming as though it was spouting from her face and her waving hands. Her jeans were already sodden with crimson and Helene had barely caught her before the hysterical child collapsed.

At the top of the track that snaked down towards the main road, Helene paused. Shading her eyes with her right hand, staring, wondering whether the water tanker would appear or not. Glancing at her watch. Seeing that it was closing in on four o'clock. It was doubtful whether the lorry would be coming now.

Edwin Thompson had reappeared again, sitting now in his usual chair, shrouded in a colourful motoring rug, looking blankly out across the land and the distant, rolling, dry, muffled hills. Helene could see him and she considered

a wave to him. Decided against it. Though she now got on very well with Alice, the old man was still reserved with her. Alice said that she thought Edwin blamed Helene for the break-up of Paul's marriage, even though it had happened long months before she had even met him.

She shrugged her shoulders, leaving the trim farmhouse behind her, picking her way among the uneven stones of the upper yard. Out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed a rat, beady-eyed, nose twitching, peering at her from beneath a stack of broken tiles. She stopped and stared at it and the creature disappeared. It was surprising that the pack of wild cats around Hobb's Farm had failed to make even a small hole in the prolific number of rodents.

Debbie was standing by the window of the room she shared with Marcus, and even at that distance Helene could see the white splodge of the bandages on her face. She considered shouting for the girl to get back into bed, but she elected to do nothing. If Debbie felt like getting up, then that probably meant she'd be all right.

The rabbit hutch was built against the wall of a tumbledown shed, not far from the big water tank. Indeed, the shed was so tumbled down that only a single wall was left of it.

Arthur Pentecost had built it, hastily and carelessly, sniffing at the idea of keeping a pet.

'Can't eat it. And it doesn't do any work. Then, what use is it, Doctor? That's what I want to know.'

Bambi was the doe, named after the character in the Walt Disney film, as was her mate. She was normally placid and quiet, with soft dappled fur that the children loved to stroke. The buck, Thumper, was only six months old, with a much shorter, smooth coat, dark grey, with very long ears.

Helene stopped by the hutch, glancing behind her at the house. She noticed the geese, huddled together in the centre of the pond, looking like a meeting of busy, long-necked

merchant bankers, ducking and weaving. There was a thin column of smoke rising from the chimney of the farm, hardly stirring in the afternoon calm.

Marcus and Debbie had been allowed to paint the hutch themselves and they'd chosen a bilious shade of green. 'Because it'll make Bambi and Thumper think they're living inside a lettuce,' said Debbie. The paint had been daubed on the rough wood with a lot more enthusiasm than genuine expertise.

With a grimace of disgust, Helene noticed that there was still blood on the catch of the door, more congealing on the dusty stones, with several large blowflies gorging themselves on the sticky pool. She also saw that the enamel tin bowl of drinking water was dry and had been kicked partly on its side. The lettuce and the other greens that the children had carried up looked as though they hadn't even been touched.

Both of the rabbits appeared cowed, probably by their shock at the nasty incident. They were hiding in the straw at the back of the hutch, which didn't surprise Helene. She privately had a strong suspicion that the little girl might have been teasing the creatures, and when one of them reacted against her she'd panicked and compounded the situation.

'Come on,' she said, picking up a thin slice of carrot from the ground underneath the hutch, poking it through the wire in what she fondly hoped was a tantalizing manner. But neither Bambi nor Thumper reacted to the bait in any way.

'I'll get you both some water. You just wait there and I'll bring some back.'

She opened the door, sliding the catch back. Putting her hand inside the hutch, reaching carefully for the overturned bowl, Helene kept a cautious eye on the buck and doe, just in case she was wrong about Debbie's attack.

Bambi was trembling, her whole body shaking as though she was suffering from ague. Helene paused, withdrawing

her hand once more, her forehead wrinkling with sudden doubt. She left the dry bowl where it was. There was something very wrong. The quiet of the two rabbits just wasn't natural. Thumper's eyes kept blinking away nineteen to the dozen, and she could see that there was a trickle of white froth hanging on the corner of his lips.

'Maybe there . . .' Helene began, stopping when she realized that her nervousness had lured her into talking to herself. The best thing to do would be to go down to the house and fetch Paul. Though he'd been putting away the vodka in no uncertain manner when she'd left a few minutes ago. But he'd know what it was. The word 'rabies' crossed her mind and she shuddered at the chilling thought of the white bandages on Debbie's wounds. Maybe she should run down and tell Paul straight away in case he needed to take the little girl in the Range Rover to the hospital at Caernarfon.

As she straightened up, the American slipped the catch back across the door, finding that her fingers were trembling a little, and that she was breathing fast. She wiped the palms of her hands down the thighs of her jeans, drying them.

Just then her attention was caught by a sudden burst of cackling from behind her. From the geese around the farm pond.

The sound was overlaid by a muffled yell and the explosive noise of shattering glass.

'Holy shit!' called Helene, turning and beginning to run back down the hill.

Chapter 8

The whole place was in an uproar.

There was a large goose, half in and half out of the window of the parlour, the one that looked out over the yard. The one where Edwin Thompson sat, wrapped in his rug, watching life bustle around him.

As Helene came running down, the bird was still flapping furiously, giving out a terrifying, piercing hissing sound like a burst boiler. Its wings were beating, feathers and blood spraying everywhere, broken glass tinkling on the stones outside the window.

The American noticed, as she came closer, that the rest of the flock of geese were waddling around on the edge of the pond, cackling and hissing to each other, heads bobbing and weaving on their sinuous necks. But as she moved by them they all stopped and watched her.

Jean came running out of the kitchen door. She took one startled look at the trapped goose and ran back inside the house again, totally ignoring Helene. There was more shouting from inside the building and Helene could see both children peering out, through the upstairs window, trying to see what was causing the disturbance. From behind her she heard the pounding noise of running feet and she turned to see Arthur Pentecost, closely followed by Gwyneth, breasts jiggling, dashing towards the house.

'Get the fucker out!!' yelled someone.

Paul? Too positive for Richard. Even though their voices were quite similar to her ears.

Someone was beating at the goose from inside the parlour, using a long-handled broom, trying to dislodge it. But the broken window-frame had splintered into jagged

spears of wood and the wretched bird was impaled, splodges of crimson soiling its white breast.

'Go and fetch my twelve-bore!' shouted Arthur, stopping alongside Helene, panting for breath. 'Go on, Gwyneth!' Shaking his head at the scene. 'Must have attacked its own reflection like a mirror. Oh, bloody stupid, it is. Bloody stupid!'

His daughter vanished, reappearing from the kitchen door seconds later, clutching the heavy shotgun, handing it to her father. In passing it registered in Helene's mind that the Welsh farm manager must always keep the weapon loaded. Both loaded and cocked, which seemed an absurdly dangerous thing for him to do.

'Get clear, there!' shouted Pentecost.

'Can you not drag the bird free?' asked Helene, aware as she spoke of her own feebleness.

'You try it, Yank,' spat the girl. 'Break your bloody arm, easy as winkin' that goose could. You want it free, you go and do it.'

At the window next to the goose, Helene saw the face of Paul Thompson, tight and worried, cheeks pale. He was waving his arms, mouth open.

'Can't 'ear you, Doc,' bellowed Pentecost, stepping in closer, the twelve-bore presented ready at his right shoulder, finger on the trigger.

'Dad's out of the way, safe. Can't you pull it clear from your side?'

The Welshman shook his head. 'Well caught it is, Doctor. Don't worry, though. The gun's well-choked. Shot'll not star out much at such close range. Just kill the bird trim and easy.'

'Oh, hurry up,' shouted Jean, appearing again at the door to the kitchen.

Helene looked up, seeing the children's faces still staring down, like drowned ghosts, shimmering white behind the old glass.

Then, the goose went suddenly limp. Head hanging down, its eyes glazing. Blood dripped steadily from the open beak. The other birds by the pond also fell silent and the whole farm seemed trapped in a bubble of utter stillness.

'Jesus,' whispered Richard Thompson, standing with one hand leaning against the white wall of the house. His face was streaked with sweat and his eyes looked almost hunted.

'Amen,' replied Helene, reaching up and pushing an errant curl of hair back from her forehead. Finding that she too was perspiring.

The click of the hammers easing down on the shotgun was harsh in the quiet. Gwyneth hummed tunelessly beneath her breath, stopping when her father turned an angry face towards her.

'Is it dead, Arthur?' asked Jean. The tension had pitched her voice higher than usual, more like that of a little girl.

'Yes, Ma'am,' replied Pentecost. 'Be good for dinner on the morrow. Or for the little girl's birthday tea. Nice meal, it is, a bit of goose.'

'Too fatty for me,' said Helene, trying to lighten the moment, but her eyes were locked to the blood that dripped steadily from the body of the dead bird.

'Arthur. Will you pluck and draw it for us?' asked Paul Thompson, finally emerging into the afternoon sunlight. 'Good job we'd just moved Dad, ready to take him upstairs for his siesta. Bird came straight at the window. Like a kamikaze Jap pilot at Pearl Harbour.' He grinned at Helene and she realized that he was the calmest of them all. 'First it's savage bunnies, and now it's dive-bombing ganders. What the Hell next?'

Helene shuddered. Wondering whether someone had walked over her grave.

* * *

Supper was a subdued meal.

Alice and Edwin chose to eat off trays, together in their top-floor room. The old man had been very badly shaken by the second of the odd events and Paul had finally given him a mild sedative, suggesting that he should aim for an early night.

Debbie was still tearful and began to weep copiously when her father gave her a mild reprimand for resting her elbows on the table while she was eating. Even Marcus was quieter than usual, simply getting on with his main course, not even asking about the afters.

Jean had cooked a leg of lamb, with some mint sauce from the farm's own kitchen garden, their own potatoes and some cabbage and french beans. She had planned on a treacle tart but the excitement with the maddened, suicidal goose had spoiled her preparations and so they made do with some black cherry ripple ice-cream out of one of the farm's two freezers.

Conversation had begun uncomfortably, and laboured throughout the meal, with everyone trying hard to avoid the two incidents that were to the front of all their minds. Instead they talked about their hopes for the promised break in the weather.

Paul broached the subject. 'Need a change. Specially since that tanker never turned up today.' He helped himself to another serving of the cabbage, offering it round the table.

His brother took it off him. 'The forecast at six was just about the same as it was this morning at seven fifty-five.'

Jean nodded. 'That's right, Dick. They said there'd be rising winds from the west . . .'

'Must be the beans and cabbage,' grinned Paul, but only Helene grinned back.

Jean carried on. 'And the chance of rain the day after tomorrow.'

'Just in time for Deb's birthday,' said Marcus. 'It always

rains on her birthday.'

'Always rains on mine, too,' said Gwyneth. 'But that's November, so it's not surprising, is it, Marcus?' She always aimed her remarks at the boy, smiling placidly to herself as she succeeded, as always, in making Marcus stare at his plate and blush.

Her father caught her teasing and looked across the table at her. 'You keep that mouth shut and get on with your food, girly,' he warned.

In some ways Paul regretted that he had initially agreed to the Pentecosts eating with him. Yet it wasn't a very big house and it had seemed silly to suggest that they eat separately, like some master–servant scene from 'Upstairs, Downstairs'. But Arthur's frequent surliness was sometimes difficult to cope with. And the girl's precocious flaunting of herself was becoming even more difficult for him to handle.

'Can I still have my special meal, Mummy?' asked Debbie.

'Hope that your mouth's going to be well enough to eat it, love. Those stitches will still be in there, will they, Paul?'

He nodded. 'Yes, 'fraid so, Jean. What is this special meal?'

'Crispy cod fries, with some stir-fried vegetables in the big pan. Pancake rolls and heaps of prawn crackers. Sounds like something out of the "Famous Five", doesn't it?'

Richard swallowed a lump of meat. 'Rather. With lashings of ginger beer.'

'I guess you have a wok at home?' asked Helene.

'Yes. Got one in a Chinese supermarket when we were visiting Cambridge a few months ago. It's great. Very little cooking time, though the preparation . . .'

Richard interrupted her. 'God. Don't let her get started on her bloody wok. We'll be here all bloody night. All I care is that the food tastes bloody good.'

'And it's more nutritious for you,' said Helene.

Drawing a slightly suspicious look from the stout Englishman. 'Well, yes. I suppose there's always that as well.'

So the conversation went on, drifting from topic to topic, as the meal wore on through the evening. It was a little after seven when the last of the ice-cream was finished and Richard brought in the earthenware coffee cups and the narrow jug.

'Can I go down, now, Daddy?' asked Debbie. 'I feel a bit tired.'

'Course.'

'I think an early night to bed wouldn't do any harm,' suggested Paul.

'Oh, not bed yet. It's ever so early and we are on holiday.'

Jean stood up, crumpling her napkin by the side of her cup. 'You needn't go to sleep, love. But put on your 'jamas and pop into bed. Read for a bit. Uncle Paul's right, you know. You could do with an early night after that nasty experience with the rabbits.'

'I'll give you a little pill, if you like,' offered Paul. 'Only one, and it'll help you in getting off to sleep.'

The girl only went reluctantly, trailing her way towards the stairs. Arthur Pentecost also stood up. 'Best go to see the feeding of the pigs, Mister Thompson,' he said.

'What's the problem with them?' asked Paul, worriedly. Noticing as he had done many times before that in social company the Welshman tended to call him 'Mister' but at times of urgency he reverted to using 'Doctor'.

The middle-aged manager stood still, shaking his head. Every week he went into town and had his hair neatly trimmed, with the same short back and sides that he must have had as a boy. He had tucked his ever-present grey cloth cap in the pocket of his trousers and now he held it in his hands, knotting and rolling it.

'Don't rightly know, sir. But I heard them makin' a most

unusual disturbance in there all afternoon. Not a lot of noise. More, sort of disturbin', like.'

'Maybe the hinges have got stuck again. But I've only just freed them.'

Richard leaned back in his chair, surreptitiously loosening the belt on his jeans. 'Maybe your porkers have got what the rabbits and geese have got. Watch out they don't come charging at you with fixed bayonets, Pentecost, there's a good fellow.'

The Welshman ignored him totally. 'Maybe the hinges. I'll look.'

'Want a hand?'

'No. No, thanks, Mister Thompson. I'll manage all right. If I need help I'll ask Gwyneth.'

His daughter pulled a wry face, aiming it at Marcus Thompson, who looked away.

'All right,' said jean, brightly. 'I'll pour out the coffee. Black for you, Paul. White with two sugars for Dick. Black for you, Helene, isn't it?'

'Thanks, yes.'

'Gwyneth? Marcus?' Both of them shook their heads at the offer.

Richard walked across the room while his wife did the honours. The wind was just starting to rise, tugging at the edges of the square of hardboard that Pentecost had nailed across the broken window.

'I saw those wild cats a couple of hours back. Haven't noticed them this close to the house.' He took the offered cup of coffee from Jean. 'Thanks. They were going in single-file, like a hunting party.'

'Probably after the rat I saw by the rabbit hutch this afternoon,' suggested Helene.

'They kill sheep, too,' said Gwyneth, her voice unexpectedly loud.

'What? Cats! Come on,' said Marcus, smiling uncertainly at the older girl.

'It's true,' she protested. 'Da said so, and I've seen the bodies of some of the sheep that they've killed.'

'Here?' asked Paul interestedly.

'Well, no, Mister Thompson. But where we used to live, and they talked of it over Pistyll and Llithfaen way.'

'Well, I do think that's a bit of an exaggeration,' said Jean, pasting a false smile on her face to try and conceal her instinctive dislike of the girl. And not succeeding very well.

'I bet it's true,' said Marcus, with a surprising loyalty that earned him a smile from Gwyneth.

'You haven't lived here, like me, Mrs Thompson. The cats follow the sheep. Pick out a weak one. Two of them go for it and take out the eyes. Quick and easy. Make it helpless like, so that they can do anything they want.'

Her eyes were half-closed, squinting at the boy, her voice dropping so that it was sensual and private. Marcus felt his knees going weak.

'What happens to the sheep then, Gwyneth?' asked Paul. Interested in her tale, despite himself.

'They follow it, don't they? Course they do. It's blind as stone and so it goes along and falls over some cliff or other. Da says they herd it, the cats do. Then they go in and they finish it off.'

'Hash panash,' whispered Marcus. It was his latest piece of school slang, indicating enormous surprise or horror.

'I can show you one of your sheep that Da say they *might* have done.'

Marcus shook his head. 'I don't . . . don't think I want to see it.'

'Not scared, are you?' she taunted.

'Of course he isn't scared, Gwyneth,' said Richard, leaping clumsily to his son's defence. Making the situation worse. 'Remember that he's a much younger kid than you are. Bit more sheltered.'

'Then he'll come?'

'No. I think I want some coffee, please, Mum.'

Jean shook her head. 'You never have coffee, Marcus. And it's a bit close to your bedtime. You go out with Gwyneth, but make sure you're back before dark. What with the rabbits and geese, and now cats. More like a damned safari park than a quiet holiday farm.'

They all laughed.

Chapter 9

The big Buckland Whites had been restive all that summer's day.

Beginning with the hump-backed boars, the nervousness spreading fast to the young sows, getting ready for their first breeding. Now all the linked concrete pens hummed with a barely suppressed tension.

They had done so ever since the time-switch had clicked on that morning, bringing them their false dawn of bright electric sunlight. Water had been released through the valve, into the polished tubes, through to their feeding-troughs. And the hinges on the feeding-bins had creaked stiffly open, allowing the carefully measured amounts of their food-mix to filter to them.

They'd been restless.

And Arthur Pentecost had been the only one on Hobb's Farm who'd been close enough to the four joined sheds to notice that there was anything amiss. He'd heard the increase in their shrill piping and grunting. And the peculiar silences in between. It wasn't natural.

Now he walked across the yard through the pale evening towards the pens. Swinging his blackthorn stick in his right hand. Whistling a chorus of 'Cwm Rhondda'. He stopped when he realized what the tune was. It had been a long time since Arthur had even seen the inside of a chapel. Behind him he saw the light come on in the children's bedroom back at the house. While he stood, waiting, he saw his daughter come out of the kitchen door and walk off across the field towards the north with the young Thompson boy.

'Eat you alive, laddy,' he whispered, grinning at the thought. Knowing what Gwyneth could be like once she

was roused.

He licked his lips at the thought, feeling the stubble where he hadn't shaved.

Licking his lips at the idea.

At the memory.

A long spell of hot weather like the present. And his relationship with Brenda deteriorating. She was several years younger than he was, but the birth of Gwyneth, just over thirteen years ago, had soured her, changing the fun-loving Welsh girl with the pretty hair and the laughing eyes, taking away the woman that Arthur had married.

Even then Gwyneth had been precocious. Her young breasts well-developed. Always eager to sit on the lap of any man around, flirting outrageously. And her mother had encouraged her, laughing at the forwardness.

'You tease 'em, girl,' she'd say. 'Make the buggers suffer while you can.'

Arthur Pentecost watched in the dusk as his daughter and the Thompson boy headed off from the farm, walking close together. 'Tease 'em,' he said, to himself.

It had been the time she fell into the nettles that had begun it. Brenda had been out in Pwllheli, shopping. Market day in the open square that doubled as the town's main car-park. Afterwards, Arthur wondered whether the girl hadn't even fallen and stung herself deliberately. She was capable of it.

Coming in the living-room where he'd been reading the *Mirror*. Nearly crying. He could still remember, three years later, what she'd been wearing. A little skirt in green cotton and a grey jumper. Trainers on bare feet.

Complaining about the stings. Showing them to him. On her ankles, calves. Resting her foot on his lap while she pointed to the tender red swellings higher up, above the knee. Resting her foot *in* his lap, holding on his shoulder.

The children had vanished from Arthur's sight and he knew he should be getting on with tending to the pigs in the sheds.

But the past held him in its dry claws.

'Nasty,' he'd said. 'Best put some calomine lotion on them.'

His hands, rubbing at the soreness, stroking it gently. Her foot, wriggling in . . . touching the painful marks . . . her smile.

'Kiss it better, Da. Go on.'

'Mum'll . . .' Useless protest. Lips sliding over the firm flesh, young and unspoiled. Higher and higher up the inside of the thigh. Towards . . .

He'd bathed the nettle stings for her, and they'd both got wet. So he'd taken off his shirt and then his trousers. Her jumper and the skirt. Sock and shoes for him, and the scuffed trainers for her. Laughing.

Arthur Pentecost had taken a slug of the gin they kept in the larder, behind the Robertson's Marmalade. Offering her a sip of it, adding some dandelion and burdock for her.

Her bedroom. Moving some books off the bed. Enid Blyton. One of Brenda's own books. A finger-marked volume of Rackham's Hans Andersen. Carrying her, the clock ticking quietly on the mantelpiece. Her hands on him, and his mind whirling.

'I didn't believe it,' he said, in the quiet of Hobb's Farm.

That had been the first one. He'd bought Gwyneth a single when they next went shopping in the town. Something by the girl with the jazzy hair. Toyah.

After that it became harder to refuse Gwyneth. And the chances they took became more risky. *Not just* when Brenda had taken the old Volkswagen *into Pwllheli*. They started doing it when she had gone *to visit* a neighbour. Even when she was taking a bath. Out hanging up washing. Or doing some gardening.

It was like a drug.

Arthur began to sleep badly, worrying about whether he might mention Gwyneth's name in his sleep. Not daring to tell a soul. Finding that his infrequent attempts to make love to his wife now always ended in miserable and humiliating failure.

Yet with his daughter he was always potent. Hard and reliable. Eager to couple with her. Whenever and wherever they could. Standing up in the larder while Brenda chattered on the phone. In the bathroom while she was watching telly in the parlour. The hazards increasing.

'She knew . . .' said Arthur. Closing his eyes and pressing his forehead against the cool stone of the pig-shed. Trying to forget what he knew he could never wipe away from his mind.

Madness. That's what it had been. Utter madness. But the girl had loved it. Loved their . . . their fucking. Making him do it more often. At first he had been in control, getting her to do it ways he liked. Riding her young body, hands on her nipples, feeling the tightness, so different from Brenda.

Then it had been Gwyneth in charge. Sitting astride him, laughing as he laboured to keep her satisfied a second and then a third time.

The girl in their rocking-chair, naked, legs spread, like a whore in a film. Beckoning him and telling him to crawl on the floor for her and then use his tongue to please her.

'Dance for me, Daddy,' she'd sing.

It had been a Friday.

Not the thirteenth. The fifteenth. The date was graven into Arthur Pentecost's memory as though seared there with a red-hot blade.

Brenda had been out shopping. The car had broken down with gear-box trouble and she'd decided to take the bus. Giving her husband and daughter longer together than usual. Despite his objections, the girl had been on to him before Brenda had even closed the gate. Reaching for his

flies, licking her lips like a cat anticipating the bowl of cream.

They'd not gone upstairs.

On the patterned Wilton carpet in the parlour, with the curtains open. Arthur still remembered banging his elbows on the harmonium as he lay down, pulled to his knees by the girl's excitement.

It had been a minor union dispute. Just stopping the local buses that morning. No way of knowing it was going to happen. No way of knowing that Brenda would only get as far as the stop by the end of their lane. A passing farmer called out about the strike and she decided to come home and go in the afternoon.

Lying there, bringing his hips up to meet Gwyneth as she drove down at him. Her eyes were shut and her mouth sagged open with the intensity of her own panting pleasure.

Brenda had walked in on them, stopping as if stricken by a bolt from heaven.

'Not a fuckin' word, was there?' recalled Arthur, still by the pig-pens, unmoving. Locked into the spiral of his perverted memories.

Brenda hadn't said a word.

Turned on her heel while Arthur stared after her. The girl hadn't even known that her mother had seen them. Never knew it. As he felt himself wither immediately, Gwyneth was spurring to her climax. Breath harsh in her throat. He could feel the fluttering of her tight stomach muscles, signalling the closeness.

He hadn't spoken. Pushing Gwyneth off him, his penis limp, dribbling, stickiness across his pale stomach. He'd pulled on his trousers, going out the back door, after his wife. He could see her, a hundred yards ahead of him, walking briskly, head bowed, picking her way among the scattered gorse bushes. Along the path that led over the brink of the hill, towards the distant sea.

'Couldn't help it, now. It's helpless, I was, like.' The

protests were hissed between his lips, carried away on the wind. Away behind him he heard the door of the farm-house open. Time to be getting on with the work. Back to the present, away from the horrors of the past.

But he couldn't lose the look on his wife's face as he caught up with her. Snatching at her shoulder and making her turn, out of sight of everyone. Closed off from the world, with the sullen surf a hundred feet below them and only the wheeling gulls as witness.

The fawn coat, and those white shoes, scuffed around the heels.

Her face.

Eyes screwed tight, like razor-slits in the puffed flesh. Mouth pencilled thin. The words that came pouring from her about his sickness. She had spat at him. Spat at his face.

'Fuckin' crazy, she was.' Crazy, she was.

Arthur Pentecost hadn't been left with any choice. All the doors were closed to him, but one. And that was the one he opened.

And then closed.

'Arthur!'

A man's voice.

'Arthur! Have you fed and checked the pigs yet?'

Turning to face the man. 'Sorry, Mister Thompson. No, I haven't. I'll do it now.'

When you had something to do, then the memories weren't so bad. The memory of the sounds of her voice and the breathing. The breathing.

Arthur moved away and began to open the metal latch on the first of the heavy doors to the concrete sheds.

Out in the distant fields beyond the house, Marcus was walking with the Welsh girl. Following her with only the greatest reluctance. Suspecting that Gwyneth might be about to try and play one of her malicious tricks on him. If only his mother had allowed him to stay in the safety of the kitchen with the rest of the family and drink some coffee.

Then Gwyneth would have gone away, bored with waiting.

And yet . . .

'Hurry up, slowcoach! You've got to be quicker than this if you want to keep it up . . . keep up with me, I mean, Marcus.'

'I'm coming.'

'Already. Well, don't make a mess in your pants, will you?'

But it was said with a kind of friendly jokiness, not like her usual teasing.

The sun was sinking slowly away beyond the western hills. And beyond them lay the sea. Marcus sneaked a look at his digital watch. It wasn't far off seven-thirty. Behind him, as he hesitated, he could see his Uncle Paul in the gold-lit doorway of the kitchen, his shadow thrown out long and lean. And the smaller figure of Gwyneth's father, about to go into the pigs' sheds.

He didn't dare to mention to the girl that he thought that they should be going back. Not yet. Any kind of reference to bedtime would produce a flood of suggestive taunting from Gwyneth. She was only a scant three years older than he was, but she seemed somehow possessed of a bottomless and ageless fund of esoteric lore that totally baffled him.

They had walked over to the furthest northerly edge of Hobb's Farm. Strolling through the quiet of the evening, their shadows alongside them. The sky was glittering yellow from edge to edge, tinted a richer orange to their left.

'It was here that Da showed me about that sheep, Marcus.'

The fencing was in poor condition. A wall had been there some years back, then a previous owner of the property had tried using some corrugated iron to fill in the gaps. That too had rusted and fallen, and a battered bed, springs dangling, blocked off one large hole. Some baling wire was cocooned around another pair of posts. Beyond those gaps

the land fell away very steeply, to a stream that most of the year bubbled and sang over the gleaming stones. Now the bottom was in blackness, silent and dust-dry.

Gwyneth had changd for their walk. Putting on a short denim skirt with two pockets at the front, and a cream t-shirt loose over the top of it. Blue trainers with clean white socks. Her hair was untied, flowing dark over her shoulders. Marcus watched her as she stood there, peering into the ravine. He was entranced by the movement of her hips, the way that the last of the dying sun caught the delicate golden hairs on her legs, faint as the fuzz on a fresh peach. His heart leaped with what he knew could only be real true love for her.

'Come on. It's down here, over the side of this big drop.'

Fearful of the undercut earth he picked his way to where Gywneth was waiting. She held her hand out to help him, but he ignored it.

'I'm coming.'

'You can't see it properly, 'cos of the dark. But we could climb down to the bottom.'

'It's a bit . . . dangerous. Daddy said we weren't to go too near the cliff.'

'Cliff!' she laughed, showing her strong white teeth. 'Not much of a cliff. Bet you it's not even fifty feet to the stream.'

'Steep enough,' he insisted, feeling himself flushing. Grateful for the fading light.

'All right, Marcus, boy. If Daddy says his little lad might get hurt.'

She turned scornfully away from him and Marcus was suddenly aware that he was teetering on the brink of tears. Knowing how that might affect the teenage girl. He looked behind them, seeking a way of changing the subject. Spotting Arthur Pentecost, still standing by the door of the long sheds.

'There's your father,' he said.

'Where?'

'By the pigs.'

'Best place for the old bugger,' she said.

'Oh, you . . .'

'Oh, I what, Marcus, little fellow? Shouldn't call him a bugger? Is that it?'

'No. Well, yes, I suppose he . . . '

'That's what he is, Marcus Thompson, and don't you never forget it! A bugger. And a wanker and a dirty fucker. Dirty old bastard and a stinkin' prick. I wish he was dead, like my Mam.'

'Why?'

She paused, as though she saw herself rushing along a road with some unexpected pitfalls in it. Gathering her breath and looking at the worried face of the younger boy.

'Because he never gives me no pocket money at all. And your Uncle Paul pays him all right. You and Debbie get about a fiver a week each, don't you?'

'Three.'

'Oh, shit,' she sighed, collapsing on the turf, drawing her knees up under her chin.

'Are you all right?'

His concern was rewarded with a smile.

'Yes, thanks. Bit fed up, that's all.'

Marcus stood and looked down at her, feeling that there somehow wasn't enough air around for him to breathe. He could see the top of her muscular thighs, the way she sat, even the pale ghost of her tight knickers.

'Sit down by me, Marcus. Three pounds a week and I don't get anything. That's not fair, is it?'

'But . . . No, I suppose not.' Reluctantly.

'Why don't you share it? Give me some of that money? Be fair.'

Marcus felt that he was suddenly being dragged headfirst into a quagmire. He looked around, but there were only a few sheep, watching from the further side of the fields. The

boy sat down, near Gwyneth, painfully aware of his budding erection.

Trying to hide it from the girl.

'Got a hard-on, then, Marcus, have we?' Voice a low, insinuating whisper. 'How would you . . . would you like me to touch it for you?'

'No!!' Then, quieter: 'No, I don't really want you to . . . '

'You do.'

She shuffled closer to him, her shoulder pressing against his. Her hand laid casually on his knee, warm through his jeans. Her legs spreading and closing as she talked to him, hypnotizing him. He swallowed hard. Hearing her quiet voice again. 'Marcus. You'd like me to touch it. You take it out and then I'll touch it for you.'

'I wouldn't. Look, Gwyneth, it's gettin' a bit . . .' he blinked. Fighting to stop his voice from cracking with nerves.

'Give me a pound and I'll touch it for you, Marcus. A pound.'

'No.' He heard his voice saying the word 'no', when he knew he meant 'yes'. And he also knew that *she* knew the same.

'Can you come, Marcus?' she asked, lips so close to his face that he could taste her words. 'Can you come real spunk, then? When you do it yourself?'

'Yes.' Pride. 'Yes, I can.'

'Well, then. Wouldn't you like it if I rubbed it with my fingers for you? I can make you come better than you can, you know.'

He was falling. Knew that he was plunging helplessly into her voice and her eyes. Her words painting a picture that was warmly and blissfully wonderful, he knew that he was quite lost.

'A pound,' he murmured.

'Yes. Think how impressed your mates would be back home. You can look at mine.' An inspiration. 'Give me

three pounds and you can touch mine. It's nice. You can touch me. Kiss my tits, Marcus.'

The girl was becoming excited herself, turned-on by the boy's obvious arousal. Feeling herself becoming moist with a need for him. An itch that she required someone to scratch.

'Three pounds . . . ? That's all . . .'

'Three. If you give me . . . give me . . . five . . . Yes, five pounds, Marcus, and I'll let you put it in me properly. Like a man would.'

'God! But suppose you have a baby?'

'No. It's real careful I am, Marcus.' For the first time since he'd met her, the boy was aware that she was no longer just teasing him. This was a different kind of game. And he felt . . . felt frightened.

'A fiver. You can afford that. Get it from your piggy-bank, love.' She giggled. 'Borrow it from Uncle Paul. He's got a real live piggy-bank. Hundreds in it. Come on,' the words tumbling over each other with urgency. 'I'll do anythin' for you. Make you a real man.' A phrase came to her that she'd heard her father use. 'Get all that dirty water off your chest, Marcus. Eh?'

Her hand was higher, rubbing at him now. He knew that it would be shameful to lose control now, but he felt warm and prickly, like he was floating. Like he was ready to burst.

'Fuck me for a fiver, Marcus. What do you say to that one?'

At that precise moment he would have given her the world for her promises. Run away from home if she'd asked him. But the spell was broken.

'Marcus! Are you out there? It's dark and time you were in here.'

'It's Mummy,' he said, amazed at how hoarse his voice sounded.

'Then it's best you go in, isn't it? Don't want her

suspicious of what we're up to.'

She caught him in her web, making him a conspirator with her. It was the two of them against everyone else.

'Gwyneth,' he gasped, holding her hand tightly in his. Oblivious to the fact that her hand was markedly larger than his. Having glimpsed the promised land, Marcus Thompson wasn't about to let it slip away.

'What is it, love?' asked the girl, smiling at him in the gloom. Smiling at his excitement.

His mother called again, her voice rising and falling, bouncing back off the blank, impassive face of Mynydd Du.

'That fiver. I'll get it for you.'

'Promise?'

'Yes. Tomorrow.'

'Morning? It's difficult.'

He thought for a moment. 'Right. I can get the money while Mummy . . . Mum does breakfast. So the afternoon's better for it.'

'Wait a minute. You can get the cash tomorrow morning. The afternoon might not be easy, what with helpin' Da and all. We got to pick the time and place real careful like.'

'A lover's meeting,' sighed Marcus, dreamily.

'Maybe the day after tomorrow. Oh, that's your sister's birthday, isn't it?'

'Yes. But, listen,' standing up and beginning to head for the house. 'I'll get the fiver tomorrow. I'd best go. Or Mum'll be out scouring the hills with a search party and a helicopter.'

Gwyneth stood up, allowing the boy to help her to her feet. On an impulse she stooped and kissed Marcus on the mouth. Tasting the stickiness of ice-cream on his lips. She pressed her tongue between his teeth so that he struggled, near panic, for a brief moment. And then melted against her.

It was a truly magical moment that Marcus Thompson was to remember vividly all of his life.

The lighting in the long, chill sheds was already dimming, faithfully reproducing what was happening in the real world beyond the thick walls. Arthur Pentecost had never liked this artificial way of breeding animals, in blank huts, without even the relief of a window. He held to the old traditional methods of free-range stock. But he still possessed the mercenary soul of a Welsh hill farmer and that part of him admitted the efficiency of the techniques.

The heavy, reinforced door slammed shut behind him as he stepped inside, leaving him in the eye-straining semi-darkness. Sometimes the Bucklands were very active and noisy at the intrusion of a human being, particularly the boars. But this evening they were almost silent.

'Not just quiet, is it?' he muttered. 'More like a bloody tomb.'

There was a faint snuffling and scraping of feet on the slatted floor. The main control panel was just inside the door and he turned to check that first. Making sure there hadn't been any stoppage or blockage in either the supplies of food or drink.

The noise that he'd heard from the pigs earlier in the day must have been exceedingly loud to have carried out to where he was doing the fencing. The buildings weren't totally soundproofed, but the way that they were constructed meant that most noises were muffled.

'Let's see, then, porkers . . . Feed goin' well, is it? Makin' juicy sausages and bacon?' Laughing. The dials all looked about right. Maybe a shade low on actual consumption, but most animals ate markedly less during a long hot spell of weather.

Understandably, the water had gone down much faster than usual. Pentecost reached up and turned the crimson stop-cock handle, allowing more of the liquid to pour through

the pipes, carried there from the shady pond via a system of pumps and syphons. He heard it bubbling and hissing along past the stainless steel valves, dribbling finally into each one of the one hundred and twenty-seven bowls.

Pentecost leaned for a moment on his stick, whistling through his teeth, staring along the corridor that ran the length of the four sheds. The pigs were penned in on either side, their individual compartments kept bolted by a centralized electrical switch. Each of the Bucklands could be let out separately using a manual over-ride, but there was also a single master breaker-switch that could free them all.

The odd silence persisted and the Welshman looked about him, head slightly to one side. Listening. Listening in the semi-darkness for some kind of sound that would convince him that the pigs were really there.

His commonsense told him that they still had to be there.

Where else could they be?

Debbie Thompson had finally fallen asleep, helped by her uncle's relaxing pill. But Marcus found it impossible to even doze. His nerves had been strung like fine wire after the conversation with Gwyneth. He had already managed to sneak a crisp five pound note from his pocket-money, folding it small and slipping it into his jeans. As soon as he'd got into the house he'd crept to his room, opening the small china piggy-bank that Uncle Paul had given him. Finding that he was panting hard, as if he'd run a couple of miles over ploughed fields.

Marcus was in such a state of excitement that he hardly knew which way to turn. As soon as he was undressed and had said 'Goodnight' to everyone, he climbed out of his bed again, checking that his sister was still sleeping soundly. And then masturbating himself to an almost instantaneous climax that left him shuddering and weak at the knees. Even after that, when he was in bed, he wanted

to do it again. Unable to stop thinking about Gwyneth. Her breasts, her lips and the promise of her thighs.

But he didn't want Debbie to wake up and catch him at the illicit pleasure. So he switched on his grey stereo cassette player, putting on his favourite 'Best of Madness' tape, slipping his cans on and losing himself in the great sounds.

In the parlour beneath him, Paul, Richard, Helene and Jean were also listening to some music. The brothers were locked in a game of chess, with Paul's flair and opportunism matched against his brother's careful, learned, patient responses. Jean was knitting a cardigan for her husband, using some deep russet wool and a chunky pattern based on a fisherman's working sweater. On the model it looked very manly. On Richard it would look like a fisherman's sweater hung on a chubby bank manager.

Helene was deep in the latest Brautigan novel. The record-player was busy pouring out Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons'. The movement playing was 'Autumn'.

At the back of the house, high above the rest of the family, Alice and Edwin slept their private sleeps, locked into jumbled dreams and memories.

On the side of the building, Gwyneth Pentecost leaned from her window, looking out across the yard towards the linked pig-units. She was delighted with the way that the meeting with little Marcus had gone. She'd take his money and then let him have a kiss and a feel. That would be enough. Once he'd stolen the fiver, she could use some gentle blackmail to get more. Not too much. And keep him happy with what he wanted.

And what she wanted.

She looked into the warm blackness, waiting for her father to reappear from the sheds. Not for any particular reason. Gwyneth couldn't think of anything better to be doing.

The gurgling of the water had stopped.

Part of Arthur Pentecost's duties as the manager at Hobb's Farm was to go right through and check the entire run of the pens every night.

The Welshman wasn't gifted with a particularly vivid imagination, and the lonely walls and floor of concrete and the pools of murky shadow never normally bothered him at all.

But tonight there was something different. Something that made him step cautiously, aware that the short hairs at the back of his neck were prickling with the tension. He licked his lips and stopped a moment.

It was mainly the silence.

The sheds always smelled strongly, acrid and bitter, despite all of the sophisticated cleaning devices. But tonight it seemed to Arthur that the air carried a different kind of a smell. Odd; musky and heavy. Vaguely suggestive of some sort of oil.

Pentecost started to walk along the central corridor, his stick tapping on the damp stone. He peered at the grilled doors, seeing the dim shape of each of the Buckland Whites behind them. The massive silhouettes, with their huge shoulders of aggressive, humped muscle, were motionless. They were all on their feet, every one of them, looking as though they were waiting for something.

Or someone.

On one of the coloured conduits that ran along the ceiling, carrying all the power cables, the Welshman spotted a big rat, crouched, eyes glittering like tiny jewels in the poor light. Its teeth were bared at him, its long whiskers bristling.

As he walked carefully past it, the rat made no move, only the rubies of its eyes flickering and following him.

There were swing doors between each of the four sheds, all hooked back and open.

Pentecost was through the first shed and halfway along the centre.

Then all the lights went off.

Chapter 10

'Looks like a rat did it. Chewed clean through the outer covering, into the bare wires. Must have blown itself into a hundred scorched pieces.'

'Put the bloody wind up old Arthur, didn't it?' Richard laughed.

He and Paul were sitting together in the kitchen, the clock on the wall showing nine minutes to twelve. Everyone else in the house had gone to their beds, and the brothers were sharing a final brandy before they retired.

'Never mind Arthur,' said Paul. 'It put the wind up me a bit.'

Richard nodded his agreement. 'Yes. The lights going off. Music stopping. The kids yelling up the stairs. Alice shouting that she wanted to go to the loo. Gwyneth appearing in that blasted baby doll nighty of hers like . . . like, I don't know what.'

Paul tipped his glass. 'Finished. Good thing that Helene remembered where the candles were. Could have had a touch of panic.'

His brother also drained his balloon glass, setting it on the kitchen table. The wind was still rising, whistling its way through the small gaps around the piece of rough hardboard over the window.

'Did Pentecost say he'd finish mending that glass tomorrow, Paul? Only if that forecast was right we could have a real flood coming pouring through there.'

'I don't believe weather forecasts on principle. But you could be right, Dick. I'll check with him.' He stood up and stretched. 'Hope the tanker comes tomorrow. Water's low and I really don't fancy drinking that stuff from the pond. I

was looking at it this afternoon and it's more than a bit slimy.'

'Tasty bit of protozoa, is there?'

'Something like that. Might be all right in a stew or soup, but it wouldn't look great in a glass jug. Still, if the tanker doesn't show, I'll drive in and chase them up.'

Richard also stood up and stretched. 'Think it's me for the wooden hill to bedfordshire. Incidentally, I noticed today that those sheds with the pigs seem to pong more than usual. Heat, do you think, Paul?'

'Pentecost said . . .' and then he stopped.

'What?'

'Well, after the rabbits and that bloody goose I don't want . . . He said that he thought there was something odd with the Bucklands.'

'Odd?'

'That they were acting a bit peculiar.'

Richard set his glass down on the table. 'In what way? Was he specific?'

'No. He didn't explain much, though I pressed him on it. I mean, those porkers are my bread and butter for the next few years. He got all runic and Welsh and muttered about dark doings. Couldn't get a lot of sense out of him.'

'But he had been shocked.'

'Yes. Two large whiskies helped that. He just told me that he thought the pigs were very quiet.'

Richard laughed. 'Quiet! When you and I were in there checking the wiring they were making a fair old noise. Real din. Rattling at their pen doors and snuffling and grunting away.'

'Yes. Couple of the gilts had actually got their pens open.' He went over and checked the bolt was across on the back door. 'Can't understand quite how they did it. Can't have been the power failure doing that. There's cut-offs and things. If the electrics go off then the doors should all stay locked. Still, I suppose it must have been the power.

Must have.'

'Fair old day at Hobb's Farm, Paul. Rabbits running amok and suicidal geese. Pigs trying to stage an escape from Colditz.'

Paul laughed. 'Yes. I suppose I'd better watch for the sheep starting to use a wooden horse for their vaulting. Or tunnelling goats.'

'I'll be glad to get back to my bank and safety. Just armed robbers and angry bankrupts. It's too bloody dangerous here for me.'

Both men were still laughing heartily as they went up the stairs to their bedrooms.

Arthur Pentecost couldn't sleep at all. The two large drinks lay heavy and sour on his stomach, giving him chronic indigestion. Every now and again he would belch, tasting the bitterness of bile rising in his throat.

Twice he had managed to doze, tossing on the narrow bed in the partitioned room at the flank of the old farmhouse. The room had been split by a makeshift hardboard wall, with Gwyneth on one side and her father on the other. He had rigged himself a reading-lamp, and he finally reached out of bed and switched it on. Picking out one of his dog-eared collection of Westerns and trying to read.

'The body of Rachel Yates lay in a pool of melting ice at the side of the barn. Furrows in the ground showed that she had been dragged there by her heels, then thrown down.'

One of Arthur's greatest favourites. The first in the classic John J. McLaglen series of *Herne The Hunter*. But even that didn't grip the Welshman with its usual strong magic.

His thought kept wandering out to the silent row of grey blockhouses, rectangular in the pale moonlight. There had been something there. Something that had frightened him and made him cry out when the lights blinked off.

The lamp suddenly flickered in his room, as though a switch had been thrown for a fraction of a second, then put on again. It happened a second time and he got up from his bed, padding bare-footed to the window, pulling back the flowered curtain and staring into the night. By pressing his face to the cold glass he could just make out one corner of the pens.

Behind him his daughter stirred and moaned a name in her sleep, making him start. She breathed the name again, but he couldn't catch it. Gwyneth had always been a restless sleeper. The thought of the girl beyond the partition brought a sudden spurt of memories to Pentecost. Since Brenda had died . . . died, he and the girl had never made love again. Not once.

He shook his head. 'Best have another look,' he whispered. That was the way with ghosts. You went out and you exorcised them. There was nothing in those sheds barring a few rats and one hundred and twenty-seven Buckland Whites. Well fed and watered and now sleeping. In a few months there would be the matings for those lucky animals that would be staying in the farm. And for the others there would be the one-way trip to the abattoir to be butchered into pork and bacon.

'Yes. That's what I'll do. I won't be bloody dictated to by bloody pigs. I'll go out there and bloody show them. Best do that.'

Gwyneth stirred again in her sleep, a vacant smile hanging loose on her lips. She was vaguely aware of her father beyond the thin wall, tugging on his clothes. He cursed as he lost his balance and cracked an elbow on the rickety, marble-topped dresser. But her dark dreams claimed her again and she never woke when he finally left the room.

Just before he switched off the reading-lamp the bulb flickered a third time.

As an afterthought Arthur Pentecost returned for his shotgun, picking it up from the corner of his cramped room. He checked that both barrels were loaded, tucking it under his arm. He made his way down the stairs again, quietly sliding the bolt back on the kitchen door, stepping across the yard, past the pool, the geese sleeping silently like carved statues.

There was a faint sliver of moon rising, serene over the scarred top of Black Mountain. It threw Pentecost's shadow behind him as he moved from the house towards the pens.

At the entrance to the nearest shed he paused for a moment. He drew a deep breath and then pushed the latch, walking inside, hearing the weighty click as the main door swung shut behind him.

Inside, the lighting was now turned down to its very lowest level, making it hard to see for more than a few paces. It was suitable only for an emergency, and was to stop the animals plunging into a panic if they woke and found themselves in total blackness. Every ten paces or so there was a forty watt bulb, right at the crown of the roof, suspended from the main girder.

Each one cast its own small, hazy pool of light that floated untroubled on the floor.

His index finger rested lightly on the narrow spur of the right trigger. Arthur licked his lips, feeling the growth of the day's stubble on his chin. Somewhere in the gloom a thermostat clicked itself on, and he could hear fans moving, ponderously, keeping the air circulating at a steady temperature.

Out on the bare slopes of Mynydd Du, beneath the watery moon, one of the flock of sheep scented the cat as it stalked closer. Instead of backing away from the predator, or running for the shelter of its companions, the animal began

to move towards the hunter. One sharp, cloven hoof set down in front of the other, rippling the dew on the dry grass, nearing the cat.

In their single kennel the two collie pups, Bryn and Gor, whined uncertainly, huddling close against each other for comfort and for security. Their eyes were staring, wide, and a thin froth dribbled stickily from both of their narrow muzzles.

Bambi, the gentle doe, licked eagerly at the blood that still trickled from the gaping wound in the throat of Thumper, the floppy-eared buck.

Arthur Pentecost gripped the walnut stock of the old shotgun tighter. He was already over halfway along the sheds. Feeling better now that he had faced up to his own fears, picking his careful way through the somnolent night.

When the lights flickered off and on and off again it didn't frighten him at all.

'But, Gwyneth,' pausing to keep his anger under control, 'Arthur must have said something?'

Paul Thompson was becoming more than a little exasperated with the teenager. She had told him that she'd thought she'd heard her father moving around on his side of their flimsy partition, some time during the night. But she had not the least idea what time that had been.

'He didn't say anything, Mister Thompson. I was sleepin', like, when he went out. I kind of woke up for a bit, that's all.'

Richard Thompson was sitting on the arm of the sofa, looking like an overweight vulture, his head drooping as he drew on a cigarette. 'You know that the shotgun's gone as well?'

'Course.'

'Don't be uncivil, child.'

'I'm not a bloody child. And I know the gun's gone. When I got up this morning I saw it was gone. Even 'fore I saw he'd gone too.'

It was a half hour past nine o'clock in the morning. Edwin Thompson was the only one at Hobb's Farm who was still dozing in bed. His wife had gone for her morning stroll with Helene Rusel. And they were due back some time soon. Jean was in the kitchen with the two children, making them their breakfasts. Both Debbie and Marcus were still in their pyjamas but he also wore a tracksuit top over his jacket.

'Maybe he just woke early and went out after some rabbits, Paul?' suggested Richard.

'Not this late,' said Gwyneth, scornfully. 'If he was out

after rabbits my Da would have been up by five and back in the bloody house by six. Silly, it is. No . . .'

'Then where on earth do you think he's gone, Gwyneth?' asked Paul, rubbing a forefinger along the side of his nose, sighing. 'You didn't have some kind of a row, did you? Or, he wasn't depressed or worried? Been talking oddly or . . . ?'

She shook her head. 'No. And Da wasn't barmy, if that's what you're getting at, *Doctor* Thompson.' Stressing the word 'Doctor' with unnecessary sarcasm.

'Maybe a fall, or a sudden illness?' tried Richard Thompson.

'Or one of them geese or rabbits?' tried the girl.

'I just don't know. He's gone and that's all.'

Jean came in from the kitchen, wiping her hands on the patterned apron, bringing the smell of frying with her. 'It's only half-past nine, dear. I'm sure it's a bit early to start worrying about Mister Pentecost. I bet he's gone off hunting or something and wandered further than he intended. If he isn't back by lunchtime then maybe you and Paul could go and have a bit of a search, Dick. Why don't you have some coffee, Gwyneth?'

The girl looked at her as though she was mentally defective. 'You don't know anythin', Missus,' she said, head down, staring at the carpet.

'Now then,' snorted Richard, shutting up at a warning glance from his brother.

'What about the sheds?'

Paul looked at the girl. 'The pig-sheds?'

'Yeah.'

He shook his head. 'No, love. I've been there. Went first thing when you told me he'd gone missing. I thought that he might have slipped and banged his head. Something like that.'

'And was there no sign he'd been in there at all?' Gwyneth asked.

'No. Doors shut. Feed and water regulated. Lights working. Everything was shipshape and Bristol fashion. Fans on. Gates shut, safe and snug. I just wonder . . . wonder whether Arthur might not have gone into the village. Maybe got up and then remembered that he'd run out of . . . Oh, I don't know what.'

'Tobacco,' suggested Jean.

'Yes. Maybe tobacco. He carried straight on after going out early for rabbits, down the track and over the bridge. Bet that's it. He'll be back here by about eleven o'clock. You see.'

'I hope he remembers that we're nearly out of loo paper,' said Jean.

'The geese have all disappeared from the pond, Daddy,' said Debbie, coming into the palour after finishing her breakfast.

'Maybe they were frightened by their brother . . . sister, I mean, getting killed flying into the window,' replied Richard.

'I'm wondering whether I ought to go down and chase up that tanker. Maybe pick up Pentecost on the way,' said Paul. 'We are getting a touch low on water.'

Marcus joined them from the kitchen. 'Daddy?'

'Yes, love?'

'Can I go out and fly my kite today? You said I could when there's a good wind, and there is one today. It's the first time after all the heat and stillness.'

Paul moved to the unbroken window and peered out, bending his height to see what the weather was doing. 'And I can actually see a few clouds, Dick. Cooler. The forecast is showing signs of coming right. Damned good morning for flying a kite. If I didn't have work to do, I'd come out and join you.'

'So, can I, Daddy, please?'

Richard stubbed out his cigarette. 'I suppose so. And if you should see Mister Pentecost out yonder, then tell him that little Gwyneth is worried about him.'

The thought of the Welsh girl made Marcus start, hand going automatically to the jeans pocket where the fiver was crumpled. He blushed, drawing a quizzical glance from his Uncle Paul. To his relief, neither his sister nor his father noticed.

'Are you going with Marcus?' Richard asked his daughter.

Debbie pulled a face, wincing as the stitches around her mouth tugged. 'Ouch. No, I think I'll stay and play with my "Girl's World" head.'

'All right, son. But go careful. Where are you going to take the kite?'

Paul answered his brother on the boy's behalf. 'Best place is up near the north fencing. Round where you went with Gwyneth the other night to look for that dead sheep. But watch out for the drop, won't you? It's really damned steep.'

'Yes. Thanks.'

'And keep your eyes skinned for Mister Pentecost.'

Jean patted her son on the shoulder, giving him an affectionate squeeze. 'And take care. Make sure you're back here for dinner by half-twelve.'

'All right, Mummy.'

Debbie Thompson was the only person on Hobb's Farm who remembered that the rabbits needed some more water and food. But she didn't relish the idea of repeating the incident of the previous day, so she deliberately closed her mind to the thought. She went instead to her room and got out her 'Girl's World', changing her mind and returning to her beloved Cindy dolls. Soon she was involved in a complete game with loads of costume changes.

And Bambi and Thumper were forgotten.

* * *

The brothers stood together, outside the kitchen door looking up at the sky. There were several wispy clouds, racing high and thin from the west, breaking up as they reached the peaks of Snowdonia all around.

'Definitely colder.'

Richard tugged at the corners of his eyes, making them slant. 'You mean there is a nip in the air?'

'And a chink in your armour,' retorted Paul. It was one of the oldest of their shared jokes.

'Did you hear the forecast this morning?'

Paul nodded. 'Course. It matters when you're a farmer. You get stuck in your heated bank with no windows and you wouldn't even notice if there was a plague of locusts or lions whelping in the Capitol.'

'Never mind the sarcasm. What was it?'

'Winds freshening. Possibility of thunder. And less hot.'

'Any rain?'

Paul sniffed. 'Yes. You can taste it in the air. There really is a change. They reckon tomorrow. And that'll wreck a few holidays.'

'I reckon people have had a bloody good run for their money. I can't even remember what rain looks like, Paul. I know that we've really enjoyed our time here with you and Helene. So have the kids. It's been a lovely break for us all, and for Mum and Dad.'

'Apart from the business with the goose and the rabbits, you mean.'

'And the disappearing manager. Where do you really think Pentecost's gone off to?'

Paul shrugged. 'Don't know, Dick. Like I said, the only guess is that he's gone down into the village for something. Maybe glass to mend the window. Pentecost goes his own way. You've seen that.'

Marcus interrupted them, coming out of the kitchen, wearing a grey jumper and a muddied pair of jeans. He was carrying his stunt kite, bright blue and yellow in its clear

plastic cover.

'Why not take the dogs with you, Marcus?' suggested Paul. 'Give them some exercise. Arthur normally takes them, but you can do it. Be strict with them if they misbehave. You don't mind?'

'Course not, Uncle Paul. I'll untie them from their kennel.'

Bryn and Gor were eleven months old, both from the same litter. Black and white puppies, built in the traditional mould of Welsh hill dogs. Lean, low to the ground, shaggy and sharp-witted. Quick to learn a lesson and quick to respond.

When the boy reappeared, both dogs were following him. Several paces behind, walking together, bellies slumped as though they'd just been beaten. They looked neither to left nor to right, ignoring the two men who stood watching them. Paul considered stopping Marcus, but decided that it might be the change in the weather affecting the collies and he let them go.

'Make sure you aren't late back for your dinner,' called Richard. 'Or your mother'll do her Wrath of God impersonation.' Getting a wave of acknowledgement in reply from his son.

Helene Rusel and old Alice Thompson also saw Marcus running towards the north of the farm, the two dogs shadowing him.

'He's a good boy,' said Alice.

'Sure is. And Debbie's real sweet, too. You've got to be proud of such neat grandchildren.'

'I wish that Paul had been blessed with children, but it wasn't to be. Have you and he thought at all about having . . . ?'

The American shook her head. 'I don't see myself making a real good mother, Alice. I guess it's not

impossible. Nothing is. Even pigs fly if they work at it.'

'You have such a funny way of putting things, dear,' replied Alice.

'So they tell me.' They moved on a few more slow steps. 'Hey, how 'bout going in and having ourselves a nice cup of tea? Maybe some muffins. Whatever they are. Or crumpets.' The vagaries of the English tongue regarding food never failed to amuse Helene. 'Maybe the tanker's come while we've been hiking along on our constitutional.'

It was only when they returned to the house that they learned of the disappearance of Arthur Pentecost. They had seen no sign of him on their walk, and could shed no light on the matter.

The wind was so strong on the exposed flank of Mynydd Du that Marcus had problems just getting his kite out of the plastic cover. It seemed to develop a malign life of its own, trying to blow away from him before he was ready to launch it. He'd flown it before, twice with Bryn and Gor in attendance, and each time they'd practically gone berserk. Leaping around him and barking at the streaming tail of the kite, snapping at it and then running off as the control lines brought it swooping earthwards.

This time they were behaving differently.

Sticking together, constantly shifting and circling, so that the boy was never able to look directly at them. They were like smoke around a bonfire, always moving and impossible to pin down or anticipate. Yet, they weren't being disobedient. There was no point in shouting at them.

When he did call them to 'Sit', they would stop dead and lie flat in the short grass. And when he walked on, they followed him.

Marcus wasn't very comfortable with dogs. Never had been. They only had hamsters as pets, and some goldfish. His mother had always refused to have cats or dogs in the

house, complaining that they were smelly and messy.

In the end he decided to try and ignore the collies, letting them get on with their own strange games. He occasionally checked that they weren't bothering the sheep that stood huddled at one end of the big north pasture.

As he climbed over the brink of the hill a natural dip took him out of sight of the house. First the kitchen disappeared, then the upper floor, and finally the angled slate grey roof.

The feeling of isolation was pleasant and he stood, legs spread, taking several deep breaths. For a moment the boy's mind went to the wicked Gwyneth and the wanton things that she'd promised him. Things that made him start . . . But he'd come to fly his kite, not start to anticipate the delights that his five pounds was going to bring him.

'Like a man,' he said, tasting the words. Savouring them.

He would give her the money later. Maybe after supper, if her father didn't spot him.

'Tomorrow . . .' he whispered. It was going to be Debbie's birthday, but there might be a chance for he and the girl to be together. Private and secret and sexy.

To make love.

'Make love.'

The expression sounded wrong to him. Too adult. Like his parents might use. He couldn't imagine it applying to Gwyneth.

He tried again. 'Fucking.' It was much better.

'No tanker. No Arthur. I'm beginning to think this place must be set at the middle of some kind of Welsh Bermuda Triangle.'

'Jewish bar mitzvah triangle,' grinned Helene. Trying to get an answering smile from Paul, and failing. 'Come on, love.'

He shook his head. 'No, I'm really worried. Old Pentecost's a moody sod, you know. I just wonder whether he's gone off and done something stupid.'

She moved and sat on the floor by his feet. 'He was upset when the power went off in the pens, wasn't he?'

'Yes, love, I know. But I've been through the sheds since and everything's fine. Maybe he's somewhere around the farm, down one of those steep drops.'

'Like that sheep the girl was talking about?'

'Phew, Helene. I hope to Christ not.'

'You think that Marcus'll be all right with that kite? On his own?'

'He's taken the puppies with him. They'll stop him straying.'

'Hope so, Paul. That reminds me, honey. I meant to go and make sure Debbie's rabbits are all right. I'll go now.'

'Go away, Bryn!' Angrier. 'And you, Gor! Stay where you are!!'

The kite was flying well. But the wind was so vicious, rising from a strong breeze to something approaching a full gale, cutting from the west across the slope of the hill, that it was taking all Marcus's attention to keep it soaring bravely.

Twice he pulled on the control strings to make the great blue monster dip and loop, and it had come hissing within a scant foot of the ground, then slicing up once more rising better than a hundred feet high.

The dogs had been bellying in closer to the boy, splitting for the first time, one on each side. Heads still, eyes locked on Marcus, working their way nearer and nearer to him. On his shouted command they stopped for a few moments. Perhaps for a dozen beats of the heart.

The kite was trying to tear itself away from his grasp, the string singing in the racing wind. To lose control of it now

could be total disaster. It rose, rose higher, against the watery sun, dwarfing a falcon that circled alone on a torn thermal above the distant road.

'Go away, dogs!!'

Bryn had come snaking in right against his legs, muzzle up. For a moment Marcus thought that the collie had actually nipped at him. His ears caught what might have been a snarl. A low growl from the throat of Gor, coming in at him from the other side.

'Don't you bloody dare, you sods!' yelled Marcus, kicking out with his trainers, narrowly missing the ribs of the nearest dog.

He was in the middle of the field, the stone wall and barred gate behind him, in the direction of the house. The fence that kept the sheer ravine secure was ahead of him, a little to his right, around fifty yards off, the strands of wire and coils of metal singing faintly in the wind.

Bryn came in again, this time with what was unmistakably a snarl, teeth bared, lips peeled off the slavering whiteness. Marcus still wasn't at all frightened, knowing that the secret with dogs lay in not showing any fear or concern.

'Bugger off, both of you!'

He decided that he might as well bring the kite down so that he could concentrate all his efforts on the stupid dogs. Wondering as he did so what on earth could have got into them.

As he turned away from Bryn, eyes locked to the dancing kite, he felt a sudden sharp pain, just above the right ankle. The boy spun around, yelping at the shock. Seeing Gor flatten itself on the turf and creep slowly back out of range of a kick.

Now both dogs were lying still, watching. It looked for an eerie moment to the boy as though they were both listening to secret signals inside their heads. Readying themselves to obey the beat of some different drum that only they could hear.

Marcus Thompson was angry. Anger leavened with a touch of fear. 'I'll get Uncle Paul to kill you shitting bastards! Fuck off!'

The kite was still tugging at his wrists, but he was more worried about the collies. Both coming in again, one on either side, circling him as though he was a frightened sheep. Keeping him turning, making him dizzy, so that he began to lose his sense of direction. Gor sneaking in to bite the boy again, on the same leg, higher, near the knee. This time the teeth went in below the skin, snagging on muscle, really hurting. He looked down and saw blood soaking dark through the torn leg of his jeans.

Just before she reached the rabbit hutch, Helene looked over the fields beyond the farmhouse, to where she could see the boy playing with his kite and the two collie pups. From her height she could see the blue kite, dancing merrily, swinging from side to side. And the dogs were also having a great time. Darting and weaving around Marcus's feet.

She waved at him, but he was too preoccupied to wave back to her. His capering figure looked so happy that it made her smile.

The smile faded as soon as she saw the carnage inside the hutch.

Marcus began to back away from the dogs, forgetting about not showing fear to them. He still hung on to the control lines of the stunter. Every time one of the collies came snarling in at him he would kick out, but they were very fast. They would shrink back from one kick, then they would split up and try another attack at the boy's vulnerable ankles.

He'd been bitten three times now. And he could feel

blood, sodden in the bottom of his left shoe, squishing as he walked. Marcus bit his lip, trying not to cry. Crying didn't do any good; that was what his father had always told him. But right at that moment he desperately wanted to weep in his distress and growing terror.

Bryn and Gor shepherded him another few yards to the side of the field, towards where the wind hummed between the narrow strands of rusting wire.

Edwin Thompson was in pain.

His arthritic hip was worse than usual and his medicine wasn't even touching the surface of it. The incident with the goose the previous day had shaken him far more than he would ever have admitted to Alice. When Paul came to help him down the steep stairs, the old man refused to move, saying he didn't feel like it.

Eventually he had allowed his son to persuade him to get up from the bed and sit in the bedroom, rather than lie down all day.

'I'll prop you there by the window. You can see all the way across the land, and the mountains beyond. It's like being up in the crow's nest of a galleon at sea, Dad.'

'More like the attic of a bleedin' geriatric hospital, seems to me, son,' had been the miserable reply.

It was very hot and stuffy under the roof. Once the old man thought that he heard a distant ripple of thunder, but the sound could have come from inside his own head. He was able to watch his wife returning from her morning walk with the American woman. He liked Helene, though he'd found her acerbic tongue difficult at first.

'Catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar,' he remembered remarking to Alice.

But now he had come to like the American a little more. She was pretty enough.

Away close to the edge of his vision, Edwin could make

out Marcus going to play with that big flashy kite of his, followed by the ranging collies. That kite had cost Richard so much money. More than Edwin would have earned in three months when he'd begun work just after the First World War.

'Boy should have had a dog,' he muttered. Knowing that prissy Jean would never have allowed it. 'Too much *mess* in her tidy home,' he sniffed.

Plagued by a headache, Gwyneth Pentecost had gone back to her room. Going through her father's half, idly flicking around to see if there was any clue to his odd disappearance. But there was nothing.

She went back to her side of the room and lay sprawled on her bed. Her thoughts turned to Marcus Thompson and five pounds and she began to smile to herself.

The boy was within a dozen feet of the sheer drop beyond the fragile wire.

'Please,' he sobbed, tears slobbering his thin cheeks. Once he'd fallen, tripping over one of the dogs, and the other had leaped in and set its teeth in his arm, ripping his grey jumper, lacerating the skin and flesh beneath. Blood dripped steadily from his fingers.

Marcus could no longer even tell which of the collies was which. They blurred and shifted and spun around him, changing places and herding him onwards.

It was easier for them to bite him now. Almost every time one of them tried they succeeded. But they didn't bother much. As long as the boy was still stumbling in the direction they wanted then they let him go. It was only if he tried to turn or stop that either Bryn or Gor nipped his legs to keep him moving where they wanted.

'Leave me alone.'

He tried to sit down and fend them off with his fists. But they were quicker and stronger, tearing at his hands with their razor teeth. Most of the time they kept low, bellies down near the grass of the north pasture. Every now and again one of them would rise and dart in at Marcus. Biting, then out again, blood frothing on their mouths. Both of the dogs kept up an incessant snarling at him.

The wind was rising fast and he heard a distant pealing of thunder, rumbling far away, in the general direction of Caernarfon. Out of the corner of his eye the harassed child caught a glimpse of the farm-house, just visible beyond the ridge of the hill. He could see the watery sun reflected from the attic windows.

'Help me!' he screamed. 'Someone help meeeeeee!!!'

The wire fence was almost close enough for him to touch it. Finally, his fingers slipped from the controls of the kite, allowing it to go racing skywards. Soaring free, carried by the gale away towards the east.

It was eventually picked up in a garden in Shrewsbury, but by then it was too badly damaged ever to fly again.

'Lost 'is kite. Lost 'is bleedin' kite, hasn't he,' mumbled Edwin Thompson, seeing the splash of blue dart from the hands of the tiny figure of his grandson. His eyes were not really sharp enough to make out the details, but he thought that he could still see the shapes of the puppies gambolling around Marcus.

The dogs redoubled their efforts, starting to yap more fiercely at the boy, driving him up against the fence, penning him there. They had bitten him so often that his flesh was bruised and purple all around the bleeding gashes in his calves and ankles. The bottoms of both legs of his jeans were ragged and bloodied.

'Don't . . .' he said, barely audible, tears slobbering his cheeks.

He managed to climb up on the tilted, rocking bed-frame, feet slipping on the cool metal, blood smeared from his fingers, splashed on his trainers.

Bryn and Gor were panting, faces taut in ferocious grins, leaping up after him.

'That's horrible, Helene,' said Jean, face wrinkled in disgust.

'The doe must have attacked the buck, and bitten his throat out.'

'God! It couldn't have been some other animal got in and did it? A ferret, or a fox? Or one of those wild cats that Gwyneth was talking about?'

Helene was standing with Jean and the two brothers, on the slope between the house and the rabbit-hutch.

'I don't think it was anything else, Jean,' she replied. 'The door was still shut and the latch was across it. So it has to have been Bambi.' She considered trying to lighten the moment with a joke about the ultimate in female emancipation and decided against it.

Paul touched her on the arm, his face grim. 'I think I'd better . . . What was that?'

'Thunder,' said Richard Thompson. 'Remember the weather forecast was for thunder and maybe even some rain later on this afternoon. The wind's still raging away.'

'What were you going to say about the rabbits?' asked Helene.

The sight of the dead animal, stiff, with half its face eaten away, had shaken her more than she would have admitted. Ideally she wanted to sit down and have a stiff glass of whisky, but she held back from getting herself one in front of the other three.

'I think I'd better put Bambi down. Certainly seems to be

something wrong with them. Maybe I ought to take Debbie into town with me for some tests.'

'She seems all right, Paul,' said Richard.

'Yes, I know, Dick. But if there's some kind of odd bug around the farm . . . We'll keep an eye on her. Won't take me more than a half hour at the outside to get her down the path and off into Caernarfon.'

'As long as that bloody bridge doesn't fall down while you're going across it.' Jean laughed. But there wasn't much amusement in her voice and the narrow smile never came anywhere near her eyes.

There was a second crackle of thunder, closer this time. The sky was growing darker by the minute, clouds lowering in from a westerly direction.

Marcus was perched right on top of the makeshift fence, fighting for his balance against the wind and against his own terror of the bounding collies. His eyes searched out the drop, sheer down for a greater distance than his muddled mind could think of. There wasn't a hand or a foothold anywhere that he could move to.

Bryn jumped again, teeth bared, reaching the torn trousers, finding the red lips of jagged flesh beneath. Marcus screamed, high and shrill, as the dog pulled at him, stretching back against the pain of a fresh bite.

When the puppy let go, suddenly, Marcus wasn't able to keep his balance. The wind eased and his hands flailed at empty air.

There was a second crackle of thunder, closer this time.

Edwin looked up from his book, seeing that his grandson had now vanished from his sight. 'Clamberin' around,' he muttered. The dogs were loping back across the fields, side by side, black dots on the grey-green land. The sky was

darker, more threatening, with rain on the way. The first rain for more weeks than the old man could recall. 'Farm could do with it,' he said to himself.

He laid down the book on the table, by the seat, and rested his head back, quickly dozing off into a dreamless sleep. He had meant to call down to Dick or Jean about seeing Marcus lose his kite, but he forgot it.

Wasn't that important.

A second burst of thunder, closer this time, failed to wake him.

Though Marcus wasn't a heavy child, the fall on the jagged rocks was hard enough to kill him. There was a moment of crushing pain as his ribs splintered on the stream-washed boulders, and then a great darkness veiling his eyes. He lay, still and broken, among the stones at the bottom of the ravine.

The very last thing that Marcus Thompson saw before the shades came down for ever was that his leg was bent in a funny way and he was surrounded by cats.

Lots and lots of cats.

Chapter 12

It was a beautiful afternoon.

The clouds cleared away and the sun shone brightly again. The thunder passed and the threat of rain receded far to the north. The sultry heat of the previous few days had vanished and it had become a classically perfect British summer's afternoon.

The chemicals spilled in the tragic road accident were more or less exhausted, filtered beneath the mountains and washed down into the water supply of Hobb's Farm.

Ketamine Hydrochloride, Dimethyltryptamine and the ammonium-carbamyl ester-like Acetylcholine. The mix had been diluted and weakened, and now there was no more of it left within the underground tunnels of Mynydd Du. But it still lay in the green pond. It still ran its insidious course through the pipes into the long concrete sheds where the hump-backed Buckland Whites lived. The great shimmering beasts, like porcine versions of the legendary Moby Dick.

The strength of the separate chemicals hadn't cancelled each other out. The mix had simply changed its relative toxicity and its effects as it passed through the different metabolisms of the various animals, acting on them in slightly different ways.

But only slightly different.

The parlour was silent.

Edwin and Alice had taken Debbie into their room, trying to keep her occupied with a game of cards. 'Strip Jack Naked'. It was an almost intolerable burden for the

old couple. Knowing what had happened, and fighting to keep the child from knowing. And Debbie kept pressing them. Asking what was going on. She wanted to go downstairs and see for herself what it was.

Paul Thompson sat in an armchair, face in his hands, staring down at the worn carpet, lost for words. Helene was out in the kitchen, brewing up yet another percolator of coffee. Through the window she could see Gwyneth Pentecost wandering around, near the main door to the pens, kicking at stones, her face blank. It had to be difficult for her, too, with her father still gone and not the least clue to his disappearance.

Now, after the finding of Marcus, everyone had to fear the worst.

Jean was lying on the sofa. Every now and again she would start to cry once more, almost silently, gulping in the air, her eyes red and swollen. Her husband sat on the floor near her, his hand resting gently on her shoulder. Helene looked in at the tableau, knowing that this was a time for sadness that ran beyond anything that anyone could do or say. Words like 'Sorry' were absurdly ineffectual at a time of such a bitter loss.

The body was in the back room, the one that Paul used as a study, with a long desk in it, and all his books of accounts. Farming books and a dusty pile of agricultural magazines. Some copies of 'What's New In Farming'. Paul had brought down an old brown sheet, placing it on the cleared desk, gently laying the boy's remains on it and covering them over with a grey blanket.

Richard had found him.

When his son hadn't returned for his lunch, he had led the search immediately. Even Alice had joined them. As she watched Jean and Richard, Helene felt a chill of memory at the words of the grandfather when they'd woken him up. He'd been dazed and half asleep, but his words had been prophetic.

'Seen him disappear, little Marcus. Let go the kite, didn't he? Climbin' up on that rickety fence and the dogs playin' round 'im.'

The dogs had vanished. Afterwards Paul had gone quietly to look for them. Helene had seen him looking round the house for something.

'Shotgun. Arthur's gun. Damn it to . . . ! Course, he bloody took it with him when he disappeared, didn't he?'

The coffee was nearly ready, slowing its jerking, noisy bubbling. Helene wondered whether they would find Pentecost's corpse if they searched later. Mangled and ragged and torn, somewhere around the perimeter of the farm.

It had proved appallingly difficult to get the little boy's body up from the deep ravine. In the end it had been Paul who had run back to the farm, staggering in his anxiety for speed, fetching a rope and anchoring it to the back of the Range Rover. Helene had driven it slowly away on his shout, while the brothers had laboured together, bringing up the pathetic small corpse.

It had been Richard, soft, portly Richard, who had carried it all the way back to the house, snarling at anyone who came near him. Only tolerating Jean walking by him.

Paul had said that none of them should do anything until the police arrived.

'Fuck off, brother,' Richard had hissed at that. 'I'll wash him, me and Jean. Keep Debbie away. Get Mum and Dad to take her out of the way. We'll wash . . . wash Marcus, you understand? Do you, Paul?'

'Yes, Dick.'

'I don't care what you say. Don't fucking care what anyone in the whole fucking world says, but we'll clean him up. Wash him and . . . I can't let my son be seen like he is now.'

Just remembering the poignant scene brought Helene again to the brink of tears.

The old sheet, the parents tugging the remnants of the clothes away. Torn and ragged, the grey jumper, dark stains at the cuffs and elbows. The jeans, hanging in shreds about the poor, mutilated legs.

'It was the dogs, Paul. Those puppies did this.' Richard Thompson had regained some of his self-control, his voice low and intense. He hadn't looked up, busily using a flannel and a bowl of warm water to wash away the crusted blood. Helene had noticed that the chubby hands moved with an infinite gentleness.

'There's something evil here, Paul. Evil, on this farm.' Jean had been weeping uncontrollably, shoulders heaving, trying to remove the dirt and blood from what was left of her son's face.

The animals that had done it to Marcus had found time to begin their ghoulish feasting. Taking the eyes and the soft tissues of the face first. Lips and the insides of the arms and legs. All of the delicate places had been gnawed and bitten.

All of them.

Paul had asked them to let him wash the pathetic corpse, pointing out that he was used to sights like this. But both of them had ignored him, bending to their task as if it was a religious mission. He hadn't pushed the point, going out instead, after the dogs.

But they had quite gone.

A little later there had been a long discussion about what they should do. Paul had been clear and terse, backed by Helene. But Richard and Jean had resisted his suggestions.

'The police have to be told. That's important. I can drive the Range Rover into town, with Marcus in the back. It has to be done. The reporting of the death is a statutory obligation, Dick.'

'Leave him here, with us. Just for a bit, eh, Paul? Please.'

'I can't, Dick. You know that. You know the law, better even than I do. We'd best report the disappearance of Arthur at the same time.'

'He couldn't have had anything to do with Marcus being . . . ?' began Jean, looking across the room towards her brother-in-law.

'No, love. It was the dogs. There isn't any doubt. The bites on his legs and hands are clear proof of that. They must have chased him and he climbed up on that fence above . . . where we found him. And then lost his balance.'

'Just like that,' whispered Richard, his face haggard, etched lines of shock around his mouth. 'Just as bloody simple as that.'

'Dick, I've told you I'll put the collies down. Both of them. I'll do that with my own hands, or you can. But it still . . .'

'. . . won't bring Marcus back to us,' continued his brother, bitterly. 'Hell, Paul, I know that.'

'We both know it,' said Jean, voice blank and empty.

'But there's another issue.'

'What?'

'Beyond Marcus and what happened to him. I know that's the only thing that matters to you and Dick, but there may be something more.'

Helene had spoken then. 'You mean whether there's something serious with the other animals? Don't you think it's just coincidence?' Answering her own question. 'The rabbits, the geese and now the dogs. Maybe you're right, Paul. But do you . . . ?' allowing the question to hang in the quiet room.

Paul hadn't replied directly. Picking up a glass from the tray and looking across to where the vodka was kept. Changing his mind.

'Yes, something here, on the farm. I can't help wondering if there isn't something happening here that's serious.' Catching Jean's eye. 'I'm sorry, but you must listen to what

I mean. Maybe serious on a much, much larger scale. Remember that accident a couple of days back?'

Jean nodded. 'The lorry and the school bus.'

'And the nuns,' added Helene.

'Right. The radio said something about some chemicals being spilled from a tanker. Over on the far side of the Black Mountain.'

Richard stood up. 'Good God, Paul! You think some of that might have reached the land here? It's too fast.'

'Water?' suggested his brother.

'Not in this drought, surely.'

Paul shook his head. 'Yes. Not in the land, Dick, but in the water to the farm. Remember that we haven't touched the water that comes through into the pond. When I was buying this place the locals said that it came miles and never dried up. Not in living memory. So it could be some poison in the pond that's making the animals and the birds act in such a strange way.'

'*Strange?*' spat Jean. 'You call it *strange*, Paul?'

Richard stopped her. 'No, love. Try and calm down. Paul's right. But, would something like that turn them into crazy killers?'

'It might.'

Jean sat and began to weep again, muffling the sound with a sodden handkerchief. 'Oh, Dick. Our little boy. He was so young and so . . .'

But in the end they agreed that the boy's corpse, now cleaned up, should be laid in the back of the Range Rover and taken down the steep track and into Caernarfon. Paul said he'd drive and both parents were to come with him. Helene would stay at the farm and keep an eye on Debbie, Gwyneth and the grandparents. Paul had given the young girl another pill in the hope of making her sleep.

'She'll go right through the night,' he said.

Jean had regained a sort of control, keeping herself on a tight rein. Even trying a smile for her brother-in-law. 'And wake up in time for her birthday. Christ, the poor little mite. I can't face that, Paul.'

He touched her gently on the arm, resisting the natural temptation to cuddle her in his arms. Knowing from his medical experience that a gesture like that could push her over the top and tear away the last shards of her control.

'Steady on, Jean. We all need each other now. Helene.'

'Yes?'

'Keep an eye on Gwyneth as well. She's been very withdrawn since Arthur vanished this morning and when she was told about Marcus she seemed to close right down into herself.'

It was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon by the time they'd agreed what should be done.

By the time that all of them had done everything that they had to do, the hands on the small alabaster clock on the kitchen mantel had crept round nearly to five o'clock.

'If only we had the phone. Or a neighbour close enough to run to to get help. Still, we know what's to do now,' said Richard Thompson.

The body had been laid in the back of the car, covered with a yellow blanket.

Both of his parents were slipping deeper into shock, but Paul was not keen to give either of them any medication until he, Richard and Jean had been through the traumas at the hospital. If they could hold out until they reached home again, they might be better. He had offered help, but they had both refused it.

While the two men sorted out the last details of where they were going and what should happen, Helene and Jean walked outside into the coolness of the early evening. Richard was just asking whether they should stop on the way and ring ahead from the public call-box in the nearest village, his voice fading behind them as they closed the

kitchen door.

Clouds were gathering over to the west, raising themselves into towering fortresses of purple and dark grey. Even as they stood and watched they saw the faint crackling of the silver lace of lightning against the darkness and caught the muffled noise of more thunder.

'You'll be all right here, on your own, Helene,' said Jean. The American was quite unable to work out whether that was a statement or a question. 'Mum isn't too well. Said she had a deep pain in her chest. Paul got her to take one of her special heart pills, but if she's ill . . . ?'

This time it was undeniably a question, doubt riding on the back of each word.

'If she's gotten worse, then I'll do what I can. Guess there's nothing more I can do.'

The other woman managed a weak smile. 'I know you will, dear.'

Helene noticed that there was a nervous tic below Jean's left eye. A pulse that was throbbing, tugging down the angle of her cheek. Also, the hectic intensity of her voice showed the dreadful strain that gripped her. Jean Thompson, she realized, was hanging on the edge of sanity by her fingernails. It would not take much of a push to plunge her clean over the brink into spiralling madness.

'What was that?'

'What, Jean?'

'I heard a noise out in the pig-houses. Do you think that we should go and look?'

Helene shook her head. 'No. I'll go and have a poke around in there after you've gone.' Though the idea of entering those echoing, shadowy sheds all on her own didn't actually seem the best idea in the world.

'All right,' doubtfully. 'The men are still . . . Come on, Helene. Give me something to do to take my mind off what . . . Better two of us after everything that's happened. Won't take a minute.'

The American decided to agree, just to humour Jean. Even though she would infinitely rather have left the sheds to their own devices. Or gone in with Paul.

The women walked past the Range Rover, its engine ticking over quietly. They both averted their eyes from the little bundle on the back seat of the high vehicle. They stopped at the main entrance to the pig-sheds, Helene going ahead and pulling open the heavy door. Wincing at the metallic screeching sound of a stone caught under it.

Together they stepped into the reeking darkness, stopping and reaching out for each other's hand.

'What was the noise you heard?' asked Helene, wrinkling her nostrils at the smell.

'Don't know. It was very high and shrill. Kind of like a scream. But not like a scream. I don't know. Not like any noise I've ever heard before.'

The door suddenly began to swing shut behind them, caught by the wind. But Helene managed to hold it open, using the metal peg on the chain. With some light coming in the place didn't seem so claustrophobic and the fresh air shifted the worst of the stench.

'Seems all right.'

The pens were quiet, with only a shuffling and grunting behind some of the grilled doors revealing that the Buckland Whites were there and awake. As the women walked a few paces into the first shed, picking their way carefully over the damp stones, Helene noticed that all of the pigs were standing up. *All* of them. It was really unusual, as most of the time the animals seemed to be happy lolling about in their own filth.

It was unusual. It was also disturbing. The big pigs appeared to be waiting for some order or instruction. But Helene dismissed that idea as being absurdly fanciful.

'Maybe the thunder's bothered them. I read they use animals in Japan to warn them of impending earthquakes. Maybe it's that.'

'An earthquake, you mean?'

'No. I didn't mean that, Jean. I mean that it seems like there's a bad storm on the way, and there might have been radical changes in air pressure. Upsets the animals. After the long dry spell.'

'You don't think that it might have been that with Marcus and those dogs?'

'It could have been. The rabbits as well. It's possible, I suppose.'

Jean shuddered. 'Anyway, I think we should go. It's bloody creepy with them all watching us. Come on, Helene. Let's go.'

Then something caught their eyes.

The bolts, electronically operated, that should have been holding the doors closed, were all open. Not just one or two at random. Every single one of them was thrown open.

'Holy shit!' exclaimed Helene. 'Where's the switch to shut them?'

Jean was calmer. 'Don't worry. They won't get out. Animals on farms like this are conditioned to their surroundings. Paul told me about it. Even if you tried to push them out they wouldn't go. They're used to being in here.'

'I guess they're quiet, all right. Maybe it happened when the lights were going ape.'

Jean nodded her agreement. 'Look. That gate there. It's stuck open. Must be something holding it like that.'

'Leave it, Jean.' Helene Rusel was conscious of how rattled she was becoming. 'Let's get outta here and let Paul and Dick sort out the gates. Come on.' Voice rising.

'Just a sec. It's something jammed in that pen. Fifth or sixth on the right.'

Her heels clicked on the concrete as she walked along the central corridor. Helene was by the main control board, fiddling at the rows of buttons and switches, all marked with their purpose. Heat and light and temperature and

ventilation.

She tried to find the control that would lock all the gates shut, but none of them seemed to be functioning properly. She was nervous, her fingers clumsy. Frightened by the strained silence. One of the buttons finally clicked down under her hand and all of the roof lights came flooding on, throwing all the pens into bright light.

There was a shuffling among the pigs, but no sound.

Jean was up on the right, by the sixth pen, peering down at whatever it was that was in the way of the half-open door.

'It's a big stone,' she called.

At that moment the bright lights showed her what it was.

As Helene watched, she saw Jean step back, jerkily as if she'd been tugged on strings. The gate swung open, wide, freed by the woman's hand, blocking half the corridor.

The large stone came rolling out after her, nudging her shoes. The American glanced back to the control-board, only turning to face Jean when she heard the awful beginnings of the scream.

The other woman was walking unsteadily towards her, eyes huge, mouth sagging. Jean's hands were raised as though she was trying to ward off some evil spirit that was attacking her. She brushed straight past Helene as though she wasn't there, walking through the door out into the late afternoon.

Screaming.

A high, steady sound. Not piercingly loud, but an even, rasping noise that went on and on, endlessly, as though Jean didn't even need to draw any breath for it.

Helene closed her eyes for a moment, forcing control over her sudden terror. A part of her mind registered with a vague interest that she had lost control of her bladder, warm urine trickling down her thighs.

She made herself take the few steps towards the pen, sixth on the right, that had been open. She looked inside,

past the gate, seeing that there was no animal in there, yet there was trampled straw and manure. And odds and scraps of food. Rags and pieces of bone-meal.

And a shotgun, its stock chewed and splintered to a stub of walnut.

'A gun?' she said, to herself.

Then . . . only then, did she look down at the large stone that had rolled against Jean's feet. Blinking in disbelief. Having to half-bend to make sure.

It was a skull. A human skull, raw and smeared with dark congealed blood. The eyes had gone and there were no features left on the angled bone. A few strands of greying hair hung, lank and wet, from the top of the cranium.

Helene knew in that moment that she had finally found Arthur Pentecost.

Chapter 13

Debbie Thompson was dozing on her bed, slithering between a nightmare dream and the horror of waking.

The reality of her brother's death hadn't properly touched her yet. Alice had led her away and tried to hide it from her, but the voices of the adults had carried through the small house and the girl knew. Knew enough to be able to paint herself a dreadful vision of the way that Marcus had looked. Attacked by those two young dogs. Knocked over into the ravine.

Then her mother's scream jerked Debbie back into the real world.

The voice she heard was barely recognizable, strangled and laced with pain. The girl rose quickly from her bed and flattened her face against the cool glass of the window, seeing the blackness in the sky that was spreading from the west like spilled oil on a white marble floor. She also saw the etched tracery of lightning, riding above the threatening storm.

And then she saw her mother stumble from the open door of the nearest of the pig-pens, nearly falling as she emerged into the evening air. Debbie rapped on the window to try and attract her attention, but her mother's face was set like rain-washed granite. White and frozen, with the bubbling scream writhing endlessly from her lips.

The girl was terrified by the apparition.

She watched as her father came dashing from the house followed by Uncle Paul. Both men called out to her mother but she didn't answer. Uncle Paul yelled out the name of Helene, but Debbie couldn't see her anywhere around. Her mother stood still for a moment, looking at the two men.

Seeming as if she didn't recognize them, didn't have the least idea who they were or what they might want.

Richard went towards her, but Jean suddenly lifted a hand, jerkily like a robot, and slapped him hard across the face. Debbie gasped as she saw her father knocked sprawling on his back in the dust of the yard. Paul went to help him, but Jean was too fast for them. She dodged around him and jumped into the driving-seat of the Range Rover, while he called out for her to stop. Debbie could hear him shouting, above the sound of that scream that went on and on, grating at her ears, making her want to cry, even though it was muffled by the height of the room and by the glass.

In some ways it was exciting, like watching a film on television, or on the video. Debbie felt like cheering when she saw her mother evade Uncle Paul's snatch at her, slamming the door of the big car.

But it was also frightening to see someone so familiar behaving in such an odd manner. Her dear parents, and tall, calm Uncle Paul, like marionettes. And everything seemed to be moving much too fast, like a sledge out of control, racing down a steep icy hill.

Grandmother Alice appeared behind her, in the doorway of her room, her hands pressed to her chest. 'Debbie! What is it? What's wrong now?'

'Don't know. Something about the pigs. Mummy came out and got in the car and she's yelling and all upset, and she slapped Daddy.'

'Oh, Lord Jesus,' sighed the old woman, sitting suddenly on the bed. 'Help us.'

Debbie turned back to the window.

Now Daddy was getting up off the floor, shouting to Mummy. He was waving his arms like he was signalling with flags. Uncle Paul was banging on the window of the Range Rover, but Mummy had locked the door and wasn't listening to him. There was a big puff of smoke from the

exhaust and Debbie saw it jerk forwards, nearly knocking Uncle Paul off his feet.

Then Aunty Helene was coming out of the house where the pigs lived. Looking as white as Mummy had.

'White as chalk,' said Debbie.

As the girl watched, Helene fell to her hands and knees in the yard, by the edge of the muddy pool.

'What's goin' on now?' asked Gran.

'She's being sick.'

'Who?'

'Aunty Helene.'

'Where?'

'In the dirt, outside the kitchen door. It's all dribbling and yellow.'

Alice Thompson stayed where she was on the bed, both hands pressed to her bosom, trying to still the irregular pounding of her heart.

From her Olympian height the little girl watched as Uncle Paul gave up the chase after the car, turning to go and see to Aunty Helene, stooping over her. He was shaking his head as though he couldn't understand what she was saying. Or couldn't hear her.

Then he straightened, very quickly, his head jerking around so that he was staring towards the pig-pens.

Debbie wondered why.

The Range Rover was skidding and bouncing all over the track, throwing up an enormous plume of dust that pillared into the air against the dark sky. The sight caught the eye of the little girl and she looked away from the yard, following the car, wondering where her mother was going.

She could see that there was some kind of bundle on the back seat, rocking up and down, eventually falling in a heap on the floor. Then the dust thickened and she couldn't make out any more details.

The big fawn car vanished into a dip in the path, reappearing a further fifty yards on. By clambering up on the window-sill Debbie could see the place where the track dropped steeply, and then turned very sharply. Just before the five-barred gate that shut off the flimsy, high bridge.

She noticed that two of the farm's Guernsey cows were standing together by that gate, their heads turned towards the house, almost as though they were waiting for news.

Below her, the child saw Uncle Paul helping Aunty Helene to her feet, pushing past her and running towards the shed, calling out to Daddy. But he was jogging ponderously, with a strange dignity, after the speeding Range Rover. Debbie noticed that her father was limping a bit as if he'd turned an ankle when Mummy had slapped him.

It was becoming less exciting and a lot more upsetting. She turned back to where her grandmother still sat on the narrow bed.

Jean's mind had snapped.

The sight of the raw head and bloody bones of the manager of Hobb's Farm, coming so soon after the tragic death of her only son, had turned her mind. The control had gone and all that she now wanted to do was to get away fast. As far away and as fast as possible.

She was driving automatically, foot jammed down on the accelerator, wrestling with the wheel, trying to keep the big car on the narrow lane. She had no idea of precisely where she was going. The fact that her child's corpse was in the back of the vehicle had slipped her shattered mind. It was just important to get away.

Hobb's Farm had become a place of impossible dangers, where even the gentlest of creatures grinned devilishly at her, showing needle teeth. Where blood flowed from the

crevices of every building and steel traps lurked in the darkness.

'Get away,' she hummed to herself.

Her eye was caught for a moment by an apparition in the driving-mirror, glimpsed through the dust that billowed behind the car. It was a figure, perhaps a man, barely visible in the gloom of the evening. It was waving its arms after her.

Jean smiled at it.

She didn't know who it was, and she didn't care. Didn't care.

'Away.'

The car lurched and she battled to correct the steering. Something fell off the back seat on to the floor, but she ignored it. Whatever it was, it wasn't going to affect her chances of escape.

The Range Rover roared faster down the flank of the Black Mountain, the barred gate appearing ahead of her. Immediately in front of it stood two brown and white cows. Beyond them was the bridge that would carry her away to safety, escaping from Hobb's Farm for ever. On towards the road.

'Away for ever. And ever.'

Away.

'Amen!!' she screamed, triumphantly.

'Mummy isn't going to stop, Granny,' said Debbie Thompson, from her high window.

'Stop what, dear?' asked Alice.

'The gate's shut and there's two of those cows as well. She'll crash into them.'

'Don't worry, Debbie,' replied her grandmother, fighting to control her breathing, like the doctor had told her. The pain in her chest had eased, but there was an unpleasant

tightness about her temples. And a nasty throbbing at the back of her head, behind the right ear.

'Daddy's stopped.'

'Stopped?'

'Chasing the car. He's coming back to talk to Uncle Paul and Aunty Helene. Uncle's come out of the pigs' house now.'

The three grown-ups were standing together, staring down the track towards the billowing spiral of grey-brown dust, pale against the threatening sky. Debbie knew that they wouldn't be able to see the Range Rover from down there and she tried to pull the window open to call and tell them. But a previous owner had painted over the catch and it refused to budge.

'I'll run and let them know 'bout Mummy,' Debbie called to her grandmother, running from her room and banging the door back so hard that it knocked a great chip of plaster out of the wall.

Behind her the old woman stood unsteadily by the bed, glad of a brief moment of peace in a world gone insane. The swirling noise in her ears was growing louder and she wished that she had some of the small, bitter green pills from the inside of her handbag. If she had one she could have laid it beneath her tongue and the pain would slowly have gone away.

But she didn't and the pain remained.

'I'll get the Volvo and go after her, Dick,' panted Paul Thompson. 'It'll take her a bit of time to slow down for the bend and then stop and open the gate. The catch on it's really fiddly if you don't know it. Then she has to creep across that bridge. Likely I'll catch her even before she reaches the main road.'

'Yes. Christ, yes. Go on.'

Helene couldn't care less what was happening. She had never felt worse in her entire life and just wanted somewhere to curl up in quiet darkness until the griping sickness had left her. Even though she knew that the sight of that awful flayed skull with its raw-red sockets would haunt her all the days of her life.

Paul began to run towards the out-building where the blue Volvo was garaged, pausing when he saw Debbie come bursting from the kitchen door, waving her arms.

'Don't mention Arthur to her,' he hissed to the other two. Time enough for that latest horror once Jean was back with them.

'Daddy!'

'What?'

'Mummy. She's not stopping.'

Richard shook his head, puzzled. 'I don't . . . What do you mean, not stopping?'

'At the gate,' replied Debbie, standing by her father, her whole body shaking with tension.

'Of course she's stopping at . . .' began Paul.

The pair of cows stood still, jaws moving slowly, as the big Range Rover came roaring down the hill towards them. Jean kept her foot on the accelerator, banging on the horn with her clenched fist, warning the animals to move out of her way.

She wasn't going to bother checking speed for the gate. The car was powerful enough to go straight through that. Then it was over the bridge and away.

'Away,' she whispered.

'Out of the way,' she said.

'Noooo!!!' she screamed.

* * *

Alice Thompson heard the insistent noise of the car's horn and forced herself to the window, peering out through the dusty glass.

She saw that the Range Rover was already close to the two Guernseys.

'Mind . . .' she began.

The front of the car hit the first cow straight on, smashing it sideways, breaking its ribs all along one flank, snapping its thick neck as the head was jerked around. The momentum was barely checked when Jean hit the second of the big animals. It was direct, the bumper lifting the cow up and on to the bonnet. Its head, eyes rolling white, speared towards the windscreen, tipped horns aimed at the woman in the driving-seat.

Jean started to scream, but it was all happening too fast.

She was hurled sideways as the vehicle skidded, her hands gripping the wheel, knuckles white. The body of the first cow cannoned into the gate, ripping through it. Knocking the rotten wood into splinters, the hinges torn from the post.

The head of the second animal hit the windscreen, starring it, filling the interior of the car with broken glass and gushing blood from several deep cuts around the dying creature's neck and shoulders.

The Range Rover slithered over, rocking and nearly locking its wheels. Coming close to overturning. The body of little Marcus flailed about in the back, arms and legs coming out from beneath the covering blanket.

Jean couldn't see. Blood and glass filled her face and eyes, blinding her. The carcass of the second cow blocked off her view and she was totally unaware that she was now moving directly towards the bridge.

* * *

Alice, high and far off, saw the first of the Guernseys smashed aside, the second picked up on the bonnet of the car, the breaking glass of the windscreen silver in the evening light. Dust made it hard to see, but she saw the fence exploding as the skidding vehicle caught it. Then it was heading for the bridge.

'She'll hit it,' she mouthed, closing her eyes against the last seconds of the accident.

Gwyneth Pentecost was also looking out, peering from the window of her room at the noise and excitement. She had been alarmed by all the screaming, unable to guess what was happening. Everyone scurrying around like ants when their nest's disturbed.

And it was all so fast.

Less than a minute since the beginning of the awful screaming.

She could see Helene and Richard, close together. And little Debbie near Doctor Thompson, checked halfway towards the other barn where they kept the Volvo.

It was only the angle of the wall of the house that stopped her from seeing what was going on down the track to the road.

The first sound of the impact was surprisingly muted and undramatic.

Muffled and dull, with the cracking of wood as the car went through the gate. Everyone froze, listening. Paul couldn't make out what that first sound was, but he guessed the second, sharper noise was the gate. Debbie's panted warning gave enough of a clue for that.

But then there came a third sound.

Another, louder crashing noise, with what might have been a scream wrapped up somewhere at the centre of it.

Then a metallic ripping that went on and on, growing softer and more distant.

'The bridge,' said Paul, almost to himself. 'Christ, Dick . . . She's gone through the gate and the bridge and crashed into the ravine. Oh, Christ! It . . .'

He was interrupted by a deep booming echo, far louder than any other sound, somewhere out of sight from them. Paul closed his eyes, knowing what it must be. And knowing what it must mean.

There was a flash of flame, orange-yellow, with fierce red tips, clearly visible to Alice at her attic window. Then a sinister mushroom of black, oily smoke, coiling skywards, wreathing and twisting with an awesome power of its own.

Gwyneth Pentecost also saw the smoke drifting past on the wind and guessed that the car must have crashed. She moved from her window towards the stairs.

Alice Thompson had watched the whole course of the accident. The cows, then the gate. And finally the way that the Range Rover slewed out of control, hitting the fragile fencing along the side of the spidery bridge. It ripped a section of it away and toppled over to the left, taking one of the main supports with it. It had then disappeared from her sight, the body of the second cow still perched on the front, its legs flailing and kicking.

There was a moment of silence, then Alice caught the sound of the vehicle landing at the bottom of the sheer-sided valley. Finally, that sullen boom of the petrol tank exploding, the force of the blast rattling the windows by her face.

And the smoke.

The pain in the old woman's chest was becoming worse and worse, fluttering as if there was some tiny animal

trapped near her heart. But she didn't move to go and get her green pills, unable to tear herself away from the dreadful fascination of that great column of smoke.

'I'll get the Volvo out and we'll go and help . . . Go and see what we can do. Come on. Dick?'

His brother didn't answer. Paul was only too aware of the lack of conviction in his own voice. If the noises told a true tale, with the fire and smoke, then the Range Rover had clearly gone through the bridge, probably bringing it down, and plummeted to the bottom of the ravine, a hundred feet or more below.

And exploded. It wasn't going to be the kind of accident that anybody could possibly have a hope of walking away from.

'Is Mummy dead, as well, Daddy?' asked Debbie, her voice thin and weak in the stillness. 'Is she?'

Nobody answered her.

Helene moved, fighting for her own control, and took the girl by the hand. 'You come on in the house with me, love. And Daddy and Uncle Paul will go down the path and find out what's happened.'

'She's dead. Mummy's gone. I know it.' Debbie's tones were calm, flat. Almost disinterested. Her shock blanked out any kind of normal reaction that she might have shown.

The smoke was being torn apart by the rising wind, whisked away high over them. The thunder was deepening, becoming more insistent, the blanketing clouds almost on top of them. Helene found that she was crying. She felt rain pattering on her cheeks, mingling with the salt of her tears. It was all too much for her. For anyone.

As she turned slowly towards the house, holding the little girl's hand, the American stopped dead in her tracks.

'Paul. Look. Paul.' Finding to her dismay that her voice

wouldn't scream. Despite her panic, it stayed low and neutral.

'What?'

'The pigs.' Then her control snapped. 'Look, they're coming out,' she shrieked. 'Oh, sweet Christ! *The pigs!!*'

Chapter 14

Every now and again something would press against the door of the kitchen. Nuzzling at it, as though testing its strength.

Whatever walked there in the summer night did not walk alone.

The wind had come biting up again, shuffling its way around the edges of the old shutters, making the flames on the oil-lamps gutter and the shadows flicker and dance in the corners of the room. Rain pattered against the upstairs windows, the ones that lacked the ponderous wooden shutters across them. Every now and again there would be another great flash of lightning and a rumbling peal of thunder that seemed sometimes as though there was a quarry blasting away in the night sky above Hobb's Farm.

'Could it have been them spraying the crops with some chemical or other? One of those things that people only call by their initials?'

Paul Thompson sniffed, shaking his head. Like all of them in the house over the last four hours or so he'd become used to speaking in a low voice. They had noticed very quickly that the sound of a raised human voice seemed to agitate the creatures outside.

'Don't think so, Dick. They hardly ever do any spraying round here. No need to. There's no crop worth taking the trouble with.'

'Then . . . it *has* to be the water. Something's gotten into

our water supply and it's doing all this. All this madness.'

'I think so, Helene. Some combination that's reacted in this freakish, lethal way. And turned every damned living thing about Hobb's Farm into a blood-crazed killer.'

At Paul's suggestion they had brought Edwin carefully down from the top floor, installing him with Alice in what had been the bedroom of the Pentecosts on the flank of the building. Gwyneth had been moved in with Debbie, taking the bed that had once belonged to Marcus.

Helene stayed downstairs with the two brothers, talking some of the time. Mulling over what had happened. They had agreed that there was little that could be done until dawn revealed the extent of the threat to them, so the conversation had tended to trail away.

'Two old, two young, and us three in the middle of it.'

Richard's voice broke a particularly long silence. Helene had been trying to read a collection of Stevie Smith's poetry, flicking over the pages, her eyes not linking up properly with her brain, so that the words shifted by and never made any impression on her. Apart from that most famous poem that now seemed ironically relevant to their perilous situation.

'Not waving, but drowning.'

She and Paul both looked up. Richard Thompson seemed to have aged twenty years in the last day. The eyes had almost disappeared into their sockets, lines deeply cut around his nose and mouth. He had bitten the nails of his neat, white fingers down beyond the quicks, so that dark blood rimmed them.

'Do you want to go to bed, Dick?' asked his brother, concernedly.

'No. Don't think I'd sleep much, Paul, do you? Been

quite a bloody day, hasn't it? When we all got up first thing this morning I didn't . . . still, it's bloody silly to talk like that now, isn't it? Always said life was profit and loss. Debits and credits. Checks and balances. Never knew, did I?'

'Paul,' said Helene. 'Should I go up and see how Alice is?'

He sighed. 'I don't think there's any need, love. It wasn't a massive coronary, as they go, but it was bad enough for her. Heart attack once you get past seventy is never great news. But I got up to her in time. Thanks to young Gwyneth hearing her cry out and fetching me.'

'Is she, you know, going to be all right?' asked Richard.

'Don't know. If it happens again in the next twenty-four hours then I don't think . . .'

The sentence dangled away into the lamp-lit stillness of the parlour. Rain came dashing against the shutters, the wind finding out the cracks and crevices. One of the curtains, by the boarded window, fluttered as if there was someone creeping behind it.

Paul looked up at it. 'It's bloody silly, isn't it? Like you said, Dick. It's the ultimate bad dream. We're sitting here like a castle under siege. Us in here and the animals out there.'

'Still believe it's the water?' asked Richard.

'Yes, I do. Once first light comes and we can get out of this, tomorrow, I'll take a sample of the pond water for analysis. Possibly the quantities are so small that it won't be easy. But they've got mixed up in some horrible way that affects all the creatures. Rabbits, geese, dogs. Even the cows.'

'And the pigs,' added Helene, unable to restrain the memory, her face altering to an expression of loathing. That large stone, rolling skull blood flayed chewed . . . she shuddered at it.

The American had changed out of her clothes, throwing

away the urine-soaked panties, washing herself with deliberate care. Putting on completely clean clothes.

Not waving – drowning.

Paul carried on talking, musing out loud. 'I don't think that the water, if it's that, has given any of them special powers. Not to walk on their hind-legs or anything like that. Not like in *Animal Farm*. But most living creatures have some kind of hostility reaction. That's simple survival. But whatever it is that's affected them has turned them against human beings. And maybe against each other, if poor old Thumper's anything to go by. Maybe I'll take Bambi out with us when we leave tomorrow.'

'How?'

'What?'

Helene repeated her question. 'How are we going to get out, Paul?' Finally giving up on the poetry and laying the book on the table.

'Drive as far as we can. Should be safe enough in the Volvo. Me driving. Dick in the front with me. You with Mum and Dad in the back seat. Gwyneth and Debbie in the back part.'

'Jean wasn't very safe in the Range Rover.'

'I know, Dick. But she'd gone over the edge. Not surprising after Marcus and then finding what was left of poor old Pentecost. She didn't really know properly what she was doing.'

They all checked, heads turning, as they heard a creaking sound from the kitchen, as though something large had pressed against the bolted back door.

'Maybe we ought to barricade that. Can't say I relish having one hundred and twenty-seven Buckland Whites coming in here. Trampling around in the dark. Come on, Dick. Give us a hand.'

'How?'

'We can heave that big dresser against it. Ought to hold them.'

The brothers went out of the parlour and Helene sat still, listening. Hearing the rumbling of furniture being shifted, Richard, panting. Paul was far fitter than his sedentary brother.

As she waited for them to come back into the parlour, she mused on the last day and a half, finding it hard to recall what had been the worst of the moments.

Seeing Arthur's savaged head by her feet, perhaps?

The black column of smoke that went soaring from Jean's crash. They'd guessed that she must have demolished the bridge in the wreckage, but none of them had been able to get down the track to find out. And by the time one of them thought about using the binoculars from the attic window the light had gone. She shuddered as she remembered the way that the storm had howled around the farm as Paul and Richard fought to get the shutters safely locked in place.

Then the power had gone.

Maybe just the sudden rush of foul weather?

Maybe not.

It was around that time of late evening that the drugs Paul had given to Debbie had finally caught up with the little girl and she'd dropped asleep on the sofa downstairs. Her father had carried her up to bed, her tousled head resting on his shoulder. It had been a poignant moment and Helene had found herself, yet again, close to tears. Gwyneth had also fallen asleep. The news of her father's death had been broken to her by Paul, as gently as possible. She had wept, but the loss of Arthur hadn't touched her as much as they had all expected. Though Paul suggested to Helene that Gwyneth might, too, be in delayed shock.

As the clock ticked remorselessly on towards midnight, the brothers took it in turns to go upstairs and check on the condition of the girls and the two grandparents. Alice Thompson was resting more quietly now, her pulse and respiration close to normal. Her husband was more rest-

less, twice calling out to his sons for help in the night. But finally he too had given in to tiredness and slept.

The three of them left downstairs tried to formulate some sort of plan of campaign.

Richard had taken a couple of tumblers of neat whisky. The effect had been to bring him to something that approached normal, and the evidence of the shock had been pushed into the background.

'There's no doubt that those bloody pigs mean business, Paul. They came out of that shed like a team of sodding greyhounds. I'm sure that if we'd been much further away from the house they'd have had us.'

'They didn't charge at us,' protested Helene. Aware of her own lack of conviction. The menace had been there all around them, and all three of them knew it.

There had been a gradual drift of the animals towards them, the pigs spreading out in a pink muddy tide, circling and closing them off from the car and the track. Herding them.

Helene recalled the eyes, red and glittering in the last shreds of evening's light. The humps of heavy muscle at their shoulders. And the pale tusks, needle-sharp, thrusting from the jaws of the Bucklands.

'At least there doesn't seem to be any kind of actual organization among them,' said Richard.

'You mean like having generals and tanks and bazookas?' replied Helene, trying to lighten the moment and failing signally.

'I'm not joking, Helene,' sniffed Richard.

'What do you mean by organization?' asked his brother. 'You mean operating together, like a unit of some sort?'

'Yes. They aren't doing that. Not the different breeds and species.'

'That's true.'

Richard ticked them off on his fingers. 'Every incident's

been isolated. Rabbits. One. The goose, two. The dogs, three. The cows are four. And the pigs make five. All separate. And so far we haven't seen any evidence of what we might call collective action.'

'Well, that's about the only optimistic thought, Dick. If all the beasts started to get together, then it'd be a real danger to us.'

'End of the human race,' said Richard, solemnly.

'Just wait a minute,' hissed Helene. 'I know how Christ-awful things have been, but there's a simple and rational explanation for them. And tomorrow, soon as it's light, we'll get away and warn the police and the animal people. That's all.'

Paul nodded. 'She's right, Dick. Shame we can't get help before then.'

'Couldn't we light a beacon, or something?' suggested the American.

'No. I think we should stick by what we agreed, love,' replied Paul.

'If they let us go.'

'In the morning, soon as it's light, we quietly get everyone down here, in the kitchen, by the door. My guess is that most of the animals will have buggered off. And the pigs'll have returned to their pens after food and drink. I honestly don't think there'll be a problem.'

'What if there's still one or two of them around? Or the dogs?' asked Richard.

'If necessary two of us stage a diversion while the third . . . that'll be Helene . . . goes for the car. Drive straight to the back door, running over any sod gets in the way of it.'

'Door open, engine running,' suggested Helene.

'Sure. All in the back and away.'

Helene lifted a hand. 'Quiet, Paul. Must keep our voices down. Remember that Alice and Edwin are both kind of slow moving. We might have to hold off the animals as they get in. Specially the dogs.'

It was a fair point. Paul rubbed at the table with his fingers, thinking. 'True. I don't see the Bucklands as being a problem. Nor the cows or sheep. Nothing really but Bryn and Gor. Let's think.'

'No other gun in the house?' asked Richard.

'No. But Helene pulls up. Gwyneth and Debbie hop in through the tailgate. One of us can open it ready. Then help in Mum and Dad.'

'Better have a rehearsal,' offered Richard. 'So that everyone knows just what they're supposed to be doing and when.'

'I'm sure the bridge has gone. Or so far gone we won't be able to use it.'

'Check with the glasses from the attic as soon as it's light.'

'Maybe, love, but I don't think you can quite see all the way to the bridge. Even from there. But we drive fast as far as that, then I'm sure we can outrun anything from there.'

Even as he said the last part of the plan, they both saw doubt on his face. It was Helene who voiced that doubt.

'Jesus, Paul. I don't figure the oldsters can make it. Not climbing up and down, under pressure. Neither of them would finish well in the senior citizen's eight hundred metres.'

That silenced them all. The idea of everyone getting away together had been so attractive that the brothers had skated around the reality.

'No,' said Paul, finally. 'Dad isn't so clever, is he? And after Mum's coronary . . . Maybe we'll have to split up, like Helene suggested at the start.'

'Could we take one of them? Carry them and lay them on the back seat?'

'No, Dick.' Louder than he'd intended. 'Sorry. But if we leave one, we leave them both. And I really think Mum's best in her bed. We can be back and get them out in less than an hour.'

'Yes. Yes, I suppose so.'

Helene Rusel stood up and walked across the parlour, pausing at the bottom of the stairs and listening. But the house was silent.

'Maybe the kids should stay as well.'

'No, love. Best get them out with us. Look, Dick, maybe we should all get some sleep.'

His brother was pouring himself a third glass of whisky. 'Maybe. I've been thinking about the plan.'

'Yes?'

'Paul, how about you staying here with Mum and Dad? Before you answer, let me explain why I suggest it. Makes sense. You know the farm and the house and the animals better than anyone. I'll go with Debbie and Gwyneth and Helene. They're all fit and active. Or leave Gwyneth with you. Then, if the bridge is down, it's not far to the road. Be back bloody quick.'

Helene moved to stand by Paul. 'I'll stay as well, here.'

'No, Helene,' he protested. 'You'd best go.'

She gave Paul the raised middle finger of her right hand. 'Up yours, honey. I do what I want and I want to stay here.'

'All right. Best take Gwyneth, Dick. Fewer we have here the better.'

'Agreed. That's it then. Up at first light. Get the girls roused and dressed. Warm clothes. Leave Mum and Dad to sleep in. Less fuss. I get the Volvo. Drive to kitchen door. Girls in. Off and bring help. That it?'

Paul and Helene looked at each other. He replied for both of them. 'Yes, Dick. That'll be it.'

Despite the pressures and the unreal horror of their situation, Helene Rusel found that she actually managed to sleep for a while. Snatching a few winks during the small hours of the morning, when the blood flows slowest. She

woke when she heard another occurrence of the creaking at the back door of the house, but the bolts held out and she dozed again, finally waking to find that both Paul and Richard were fast asleep. And there was the first, faint trace of an opalescent light around the edges of the shutter. Dawn wasn't far off.

'Guess it's time to find out what we're doing,' she said to herself. 'Sure hope it's waving and not drowning.'

For the first time since she'd been eight years old, staying with her aunt at Tupelo, Missouri, Helene began to pray.

Chapter 15

'Oh, Christ Jesus! Look at that.'

There was fear in Richard Thompson's voice, naked and cold. But the woman could also hear something else. Something that was close to religious awe. She got herself up out of the chair, levering the stiffness from her back and shoulders. Groaning a little to herself at the discomfort.

'Come and look. Paul!' Raising his voice a tone, but still keeping it to a whispering urgency. His brother started awake, standing up, looking around the parlour quickly, as if he wasn't sure where he was.

'What is it, Dick?'

He fumbled for his rimless glasses, picking them up from the carpet near his feet, joining Helene at his brother's side, stooping over them both. The heavy stubble on his chin glittered like powdered silver in the ghostly, filtered light.

'Look out of that crack at the side of the shutter. Look at them.' Sudden alarm: 'Don't touch the shutter!'

Helene moved and managed to squint through, with Paul leaning on her shoulder. She focused her eye at the narrow slit, blinking at the brightness.

Behind her she heard and felt Paul's intake of breath. But neither of them said anything.

There wasn't anything that they could say.

Richard spoke first. 'Think it's the same all round the house?'

Paul cleared his throat, loud in the morning silence. The lamps had guttered out in the night and the room smelled heavy from the oil.

'I think so. Probably. Best have a look. You take that side,' pointing to the north. 'And I'll take this side.'

It was the first time in their relationship that Helene had ever heard him losing control. The habitual calmness had slipped and his fear was so strong that she could almost smell it.

She looked again through the gap in the shutter.

Nothing had changed. As far as she could see the land seemed covered with pigs. Sprawling pink and white beasts, looking much larger now that they were out of their cribbing pens. The rain had stopped and there was the pale fire of the rising sun, away behind them, further to the east. The yard was filled with the Bucklands, ringing the scummy pond, more of them out among the sheds and barns. Only one or two of them seemed to be awake, the rest lying down, motionless, eyes closed.

When she looked more carefully Helene could also make out several of the other animals from Hobb's Farm. The pair of goats, Mike and Maggy, standing and chewing quietly away to the left, near where the Volvo was garaged. Both of them dragging long chains, showing that they'd somehow managed to draw their stakes. And the dogs were back. Bryn sleeping with his head on the flank of Gor, close to the far edge of the pool, beneath the rowans. A solitary cow was lying down across the path that wound up towards the water tank and the rabbits' hutch.

Paul came back into the parlour. 'There's pigs on this side of the house as well, round the corner. And about thirty of those bloody cats all bundled together, like a load of old fur coats.'

'More cats on my side as well,' whispered Richard. 'About eight or ten of them.' He seemed the liveliest of the three of them this morning, as though the prospect of some potentially vengeful action had cheered him. 'The sheep are all round that side as well, but I think all of them are asleep.'

Paul sat down, burying his head in his hands. 'Jesus,

Dick, what do we do now? They've got us trapped in the house. If they're really out to get us they can probably break in the door if they keep at it long enough.'

'I'll be out and back with help long before that, mate,' replied his brother.

But Paul was insistent. 'How are you going to get through all of them?'

'Way we agreed. Speed. Move fast and direct. Animals' brains are smaller and slower than ours. They won't try anything 'til it's too late.'

Helene, reluctantly, agreed. 'Guess we have to try it, dear,' she said.

'Fine.' Richard rubbed his chubby hands together. 'Get the girls dressed and ready, Helene. Keep them quiet or we've had it. Best get them in jeans.'

Paul livened up again, now that there was a decisive course of action off and running. 'Make it two pairs. Bit of protection. Protect their legs. Boots.'

Richard nodded. 'Fine. Debbie's got a pair of high riding-boots. Black rubber ones. And Gwyneth must have some wellies. Several jumpers.' He hesitated, adding almost as an afterthought: 'Just in case.'

Helene drew in a long, slow breath. Those three cautious words bringing a chill reality. It wasn't an adventure. She had seen the results herself of what would happen if things turned sour.

Richard went on. 'I'll do the same with clothes. There's that long-handled axe in the corner of the kitchen. I'll take that. But if I go fast I should . . . I've got it! You two can stage a diversion, like we talked about before. Go round the other side. Open a window and shout and make a real row. Get the animals there while the girls make a run for it. Yes. It'll work.'

The clock was showing eight minutes after five.

Richard was wearing an old donkey jacket of his brother's, stained and torn under the sleeve. Beneath it he wore two thick jumpers. His jeans were tucked into clumsy rubber waders. He held an axe in his left hand, the keys to the Volvo in his right hand.

Gwyneth Pentecost was her usual sullen self. The death of her father seemed to have skimmed across her, like a pebble skimmed over a frozen stream. She was wearing a couple of sweaters, a dark green anorak and faded jeans that she wore tucked into the tops of a pair of muddied wellingtons.

Debbie was very doped, hardly realizing what was happening or where she was going. Twice she asked plaintively where her mother was, once querying her father about where Marcus was and why wasn't he coming with them.

Richard bit his lower lip, looking at Helene and at Paul. 'Right. I'm going now. Apart from a couple of the pigs and the goats, they all seem asleep. I'll go fast and light. Get these doors open and straight into the car. Moment I n inside I'm safe. So you two go and bang and shout round the far side of the house.'

'Should lure some of the buggers,' said Paul Thompson, trying for a grin, and not quite getting there.

'Yes. You girls get ready by the door. Gwyneth, you'll have to help Debbie. Right?' Gwyneth nodded. 'Fine. But you don't open the door until I give you a long blast on the horn. Don't forget. Then come running.'

The Welsh teenager looked him in the eye, repeating her instructions in a flat voice. 'I watch for Debbie. As soon as I hear a long blast on the horn I open the door and we run as fast as we can.'

'Don't hesitate,' urged Paul. 'There might not be too much time.'

Dick turned to face Helene, bending and kissing her

quickly on the cheek. She noticed that his lips were dry and hot. He reached out and shook Paul by the hand. But the stiffness of the moment melted and the brothers hugged each other, arms about each other's shoulders, both close to tears.

'Be back bloody fast, old chap,' said Richard.

'Know you will, Dick. Haven't doubted it for a moment. Tell 'em to take care. Warn them about the water and . . . everything. Good luck.'

The bolts were slid silently back off the stout kitchen door. The brothers had already shifted the dresser. Dick looked again at Helene and Paul. 'Tell Mum and Dad and say "Goodbye" to them for me. Tell them why we left . . . you know, don't you?'

'Course. Best this way, Dick. When you get to the ravine, if the bridge is gone, you'll have to move bloody fast. The pigs won't be a danger there. But there's the dogs. Keep the girls together. The dogs are the biggest threat.'

Richard waved the long axe at him with a cavalier gesture. 'I'll see to them. Good job you didn't go in for breeding panthers or something like that. Right, girls. As soon as the horn blows, you come running. Debbie first.'

Paul had a sudden thought. 'Gwyneth.'

'Yes?'

'The door.'

'What?'

'Helene and I will be off the other side of the house, in the room with the piano. So as soon as you're out you push the door hard shut behind you. Or we'll have a house filled with livestock.'

'I will. 'Bye, Helene. 'Bye, Doctor.'

The door opened a crack and Richard slipped through it, showing surprising speed and lightness for such a plump man. Paul pushed the door shut behind him, hearing the catch click. He walked quickly to join Helene peering

through a slit in the shutters of the parlour window. The two young girls stayed in the kitchen, ears strained for the signal of the horn.

'Be glad when this is over,' Paul whispered to the woman.

'You and me both, lover. There he goes.'

It was painfully like watching someone trying to cross a minefield, without knowing where any of the mines are placed. Richard wasn't quite running, moving as fast and quietly as he could in the clumsy waders, the axe swinging loose and ready.

'They haven't realized yet but that pig's moving and that one . . .' Paul Thompson stopped speaking, realizing that it was only his nerves talking. Helene could see perfectly well for herself what was happening in the cool dawn.

As the man moved through them, only one or two of the Bucklands seemed to waken. One of the goats stopped grazing and took a few tentative steps towards Richard, its chain tinkling on the stones. But he was already at the gates to the garage.

In the house they watched him fumble with the rusted iron latch, heaving it open and then allowing it to fall to the ground. The clang that it made was clearly audible inside the room.

'Christ,' sighed Helene. 'That'll surely waken the bastards.'

'He's in,' hissed Paul.

'Should I open the door yet?' asked Gwyneth Pentecost from the kitchen.

'No. Not 'til you hear the horn. Come on, Helene, baby. Let's go divert the animals.'

He was trying hard for calm, and she did her best to support him. 'Right with you, pizza-man,' she called.

Suddenly there was an atmosphere of liveliness.

Of hope.

Richard was in the car. Soon he and the girls would be

safely away from Hobb's Farm and from then on it would be just a matter of time before they were all saved.

Helene Rusel felt like waving.

She followed Paul out of the parlour, along the narrow hall. Past the steel engraving of a sailing-ship running aground on jagged rocks. Into the rear room they went. Paul's study where the mutilated body of the little boy had been laid.

Paul was wrestling with the heavy iron bar that held the shutters closed, banging at it with his fist. Pushing at the white wood so that daylight flooded into the small room. He flicked the catch and flung the window open with a great crash.

'Hey! Hey!!! Come on, you crazy bastard sodding animals! Come on here!!!'

Helene joined him, adding her own yells and screams, putting all of her hatred into it. Not conscious of what she was saying. Cursing at the animals, watching as the creatures began to get to their feet, staring fixedly towards the house. The sheep all took a few paces towards the building, stopping together as they heard another noise.

'The car,' said Paul.

The roaring of the engine. And then the swelling sound of over a hundred pigs, all starting to squeal at once.

Helene and Paul gazed at one another, stricken at the realization that their attempt to stage a diversion to help Richard had been a pitiful failure.

Edwin Thompson had been awake, off and on, since about three in the morning.

He'd been dreaming, confused, muddled dreams. Of taking a cutting from a lilac bush, while men stood all around him digging holes in the road, with large red lamps at every corner.

Edwin remembered that he'd called out a few times to his

wife, until he recalled that his son had said she'd had a nasty turn. That she was sleeping sound because of some pills or other that he'd given her.

The old man had been told only a muted version of what had happened during the previous twenty-four hours. And it had been scarcely comprehensible. He knew that his grandson was dead. Something to do with some dogs frightening little Marcus. It reminded him again about seeing the kite as it drifted away, blue against blue. He also knew that the manager, the surly Welshman, had vanished. He'd never taken much to Pentecost, disliking his secrecy, mistrusting him. Nobody had yet told Edwin of the finding of the skull and remains in the pens. But he'd heard about Jean. That had been the last bit of news. She'd been killed in a car-crash.

That was all he knew.

Now he heard all the yelling from the study and he managed to lever himself painfully to the side of the rumpled bed, using the failing strength in his arms to pull himself upright, making it across the room to the front window. He looked out at a beautiful dawn, over the pond and the rolling Welsh hills beyond the borders of Hobb's Farm. Edwin's hearing wasn't as good as it had once been, and he didn't have his glasses on. They were in their maroon case on the table at the head of the bed. But he could still see enough to make a guess at what was happening. What all the excitement was about.

'Them porkers all got out,' he chuckled. Turning to where his wife lay sleeping in the other bed. 'That Welsh bugger's run off and let all the porkers out of their bloody sheds.'

The idea appealed to him and he laughed again. The sight of a sea of pigs surging around the house was an extraordinary one and he relished the idea of the trouble that it would take to herd them back in again. That would

provide him with enough entertainment for the rest of the day.

He turned away from his dozing wife, in time to see the dark blue Volvo come bursting out of the barn where it had been garaged. So fast that it caught the door that was swinging open, breaking it off its hinges. The car slewed sideways, then carried on, heading towards the back door of the house, directly below where Edwin stood.

From the barn to the house was about seventy paces for a grown man.

Edwin Thompson hung on the sill of the window with clawed fingers, staring out into the clear, pale light of the early morning, seeing his younger son wrestling with the wheel of the heavy estate car.

'Hę'll 'it them porkers, Alice,' he called.

Richard's plan had been founded on the theory that the animals would move out of the way of the vehicle. Or try to move. But neither he nor Paul had actually seen the way that the cows had sacrificed themselves in front of the Range Rover. If they'd seen that, then they might have reconsidered their strategy.

'Said he'd 'it 'em,' crowed the old man, triumphantly, seeing the car lurch into the first of the ranks of the Bucklands.

The pigs hadn't moved very far or fast, simply massing together so that there was no way through for the driver. He had no choice but to drive straight at the pigs, crushing the first of them under the protruding bumpers of the Volvo. Hitting more, so that the injured animals immediately began to scream, like hurt human beings. Blood jetted out, splattering on the windscreen so that Richard couldn't see where he was going.

There hadn't been time to accelerate to a great speed, but he was still doing close to thirty miles an hour when he hit the Bucklands. But they stopped him dead, less than twenty

yards from the kitchen door of the house. In the rush and terror of opening the doors of the barn and getting in the car, he hadn't bothered with the seat-belt. The relief of shutting himself in the Volvo, wrapped in the warm darkness of the old barn, had been so intense that details like that had never occurred to him.

The result was predictable.

When the big car crashed into the rows of pigs it was brought to an almost immediate halt, and Richard's body was hurled forwards. His head banged against the screen, stunning him, while his chest was pressed against the steering-wheel.

Setting off the horn.

Helene Rusel ran into the parlour just in time to see what had happened, glimpsing the collision through the crack in the shutters, hearing the back door swing open, and the girls running out in response to the signal.

She screamed at them to stop.

Not waving.

Drowning.

Chapter 16

Debbie was the first to die.

When she ran out of the kitchen door, pushed by Gwyneth, she had been expecting to find her father sitting there at the wheel of the familiar blue Volvo, smiling at her. A magic carpet to freedom and safety from this hideous nightmare place of death.

Reality didn't have much meaning to her. The deaths had been too shocking and too immediate for her to have any concept of their finality.

The car was there, all right. But it was quite a long way off. The door wasn't even open ready for her to skip in. And she could see her father, slumped over the wheel. The horn was blaring in a continuous wall of noise, filling the morning. Her father sat up, suddenly, and she cried out to him.

'Daddy!!!'

Blood was streaming over his plump face, pouring from a deep cut on the hairline, streaming over his eyes, blinding him. It masked his mouth, trickling over his neck, mottling the jumpers he was wearing. He was almost unrecognizable to the little girl.

Then, only then, did she notice the pigs. Hundreds of them, muddy and narrow-eyed, barring her path to the car. If Debbie had turned then . . . if she'd stopped and gone straight back to the house, she might have been saved. Even though Gwyneth had done as she'd been told and slammed the kitchen door firmly shut.

'Daddy!' she called again. Debbie didn't lack courage. She started to run towards the Volvo. Richard was struggling to get the car moving in her direction, wiping the

veil of scarlet from his eyes. He succeeded only in stalling the vehicle.

Helene watched it from the shuttered parlour window. One floor above her Edwin Thompson began to cry, thick tears trickling from his rheumy eyes, over the lined cheeks. He wanted to close his eyes. Wanted to desperately. He knew what was going to happen, knew what he was going to see.

The first two or three pigs were easily dodged, great slow, ponderous creatures that they were.

Then one bit at her, swinging its head with a raking cut of the tusks. It made her jump sideways, slipping in the mud from last night's heavy rain.

Debbie fell.

A Buckland White, eighteen months old, weighs something over two hundred and forty pounds. Not all that far short of twenty stones. As the girl fell one of them squealed angrily, stepping on her outstretched hand. Cracking the bones of the back of her wrist, snapping fingers like breadsticks. The animal stumbled, rolling half on top of the child, breaking her ribs, the splintered ends of bone tearing into her lungs.

She tried to scream. Really tried, but she was choking. Drowning on her own life-blood as it flooded into her nose and mouth.

Then the rest of the pigs closed in, pushing at each other in their frenzy to taste blood and meat.

Helene looked away from the yard, sitting down on the large sofa, burying her face in her hands. Paul had only just reached the window and he stayed there, speechless.

Gwyneth was close behind Debbie Thompson. Like the younger girl she had thought that the Volvo would be much closer to them, and she had never expected such a terrifying mass of pigs.

But she was big and strong for her age, and she'd been around animals all her life. It was only when she saw Debbie fall, submerged by the Bucklands, that she became

really frightened. The girl simply vanished. There wasn't a scream or anything like that. The pigs had just rolled across her like an unstoppable tide over flat sand.

Gwyneth tried to outflank them, running to the right, dodging the first few attempts to bite at her, twisting past the snuffling jaws, the blunt questing muzzles, keeping her balance despite the slimy dirt. The patterned soles of the wellington boots gripped the mud.

'Go on,' muttered Edwin Thompson, fingers clenched into the palms of his hands. Ignoring the pain.

Pain that was creeping insidiously into his chest, fluttering at the muscles of his heart.

Gwyneth never saw the dog. It was Bryn, faster than Gor by several paces, streaking in and hitting her at knee level, jaws ripping out a great hole through both pairs of jeans, opening a deep gash in the soft flesh beneath. She screamed, stopping and reaching down, bringing up her fingers slick with blood, bright in the dawning.

Motionless as she now was, it was too easy for the pigs to knock her down and crush her the way that they had with Debbie. Gwyneth was luckier, one of the Bucklands kneeling on her neck and breaking it, killing her instantly. So that she never felt the teeth.

A pain worse than anything he'd ever experienced struck at Edwin Thompson. Like a giant's fist seizing his body, squeezing his heart as if it were a rotten apple. Stopping it in mid-beat, with a jarring shock.

He slipped down from his hold on the window, dead fingers opening, so that he fell to the linoleum. As he dropped, his arm caught a floral china water jug, smashing it to the floor. Across the room, on the bed, Alice stirred at the noise.

'Here, Edwin,' she mumbled, angrily, eyes still locked shut. 'I'm tryin' to get some kip.'

* * *

'Can't you help him, Paul?' cried Helene, shouting at the top of her voice to be heard above all of the other noises. Mainly the cacophony of squealing from the ravening pigs.

'No. If he stays in the car he'll be all right. Get in reverse and gradually . . . The girls are both dead, Helene. Both fuckin' dead. Oh, Christ!'

She stood again and joined him by the window, looking out on a scene of madness. A mediaeval vision of Hell, worse than the horrors of Bosch, sprung to hideous life on a summer's morn in modern Wales.

The blue car was trapped in the midst of a heaving mass of pink and grey. The Bucklands were all pushing at it, gashing each other's flanks in their eagerness to get at the man. Already the Volvo was rocking and tilting, the panels dented, lights smashed.

Richard was wiping blood from his eyes, gasping with shock. He felt sick from the blow to his head, struggling to find an awareness of what was going on. The sturdy estate car was tossing like a coracle in a typhoon, and the air was heavy with screaming.

He had no idea where the girls were.

He hadn't seen them, so . . . With an effort he focused on the kitchen door, relieved to see that it was still closed tight. At least Debbie was safe. All he had to do now was fight his way out of the car and either run for it, or make once more for the security of the farmhouse.

As a bank manager all of Richard's instincts were to opt for safety. But he'd set off on a mission with the lives of others resting with him, and it would not have been very brave or honourable to have given up and scurried back to the others.

He found the long haft of the axe, gripping it with hands that were slippery with his own blood, looking out of both sides of the Volvo through the starred glass of the windows, seeing which looked the better bet. Deciding that neither of them did. But there seemed to be rather fewer pigs at the

back. Wincing at the pain from his jarred wrist, Richard crawled over the back seats, into the luggage space. Keeping flat so that Bucklands wouldn't be able to see him. Reaching for the catch on the tailgate.

With a grunt of effort he pulled the catch across, kicking the door up and open. He dived out, across the humped backs of the turmoil of a half dozen pigs, falling and rolling clumsily on his shoulder.

'Get up, Dick!' shouted his brother, inaudible and helpless inside the parlour.

Richard Thompson fought his way back to his feet, hefting the axe in a hissing circle of death, clearing a space for himself among the grunting, snapping creatures.

He saw that there was a fairly open way, towards the main track. Only a dozen or so of the Bucklands blocked him off and he advanced, gritting his teeth at the impact as the blade dug fiercely into the hip of the nearest animal. Up, and in again with the axe, blood jetting from a second great gash, opening the joint at the top of one of its front legs. It kicked and flailed, fighting to recover its balance.

But the man moved on, catching another pig a glancing blow on the side of its voracious snout, slicing through an eye, half-blinding it.

'He's going to make it. Son of a bitch, he's going to make it,' said Helene softly.

A path opened briefly and Richard stepped along it, moving faster as he saw that the main body of the Bucklands were now aware of his escape and were moving in his direction, around the stranded car. He would be weighed down by their sheer numbers, but he still had speed on his side.

The goats had played little part in the massacre of Hobb's Farm, but now they intervened.

Richard Thompson was dimly aware of a metallic jingling sound, above the rest of the babel. A chain being dragged over stone.

He turned in time to see the first of the goats, large as a pony, charging at him, head down, horns glinting yellow in the morning sunlight. The axe came back and round, just in time to save him.

It caught Maggy, the nanny-goat, across the throat, nearly decapitating the animal. The head flopped over, neck fountaining blood, the goat dropping in a clatter of hooves among the pigs, its skull only attached to its neck by a bloody thread of gristle.

Mike, her mate, close behind, had slowed when his dangling chain had become caught on a rusting harrow at the corner of the yard, by the barn. The billy, larger than Maggy, beard trailing, came at the man with ferocious venom. And there was not quite enough time for Richard to bring the crimson-dripping axe back for a swing at the goat.

The horns hit him in the groin, with all of the animal's nine stone behind it.

It was like the kick of a mule.

The man doubled over, incongruously like a fawning courtier, the axe dropping from his hands. Clutching himself, immediately beginning to retch and vomit. Strings of yellow bile dangled from his white lips as he fell down to his knees in the trampled mud. The pain was so intense as his genitals were crushed against the sharp angle of his pubic bone that Richard fainted, sliding on his front in the yard.

Helene took Paul by the arm, gripping him tightly, pulling him away from the shutters. 'Nothing, love. Nothing you can do. Nobody can.'

Richard Thompson recovered consciousness as the pigs swarmed round and over him. He felt his left ankle break under one of the Bucklands, heard the sharp snap. But there was no pain from it. Another of the pigs was looming over him, its gaping jaws and foul breath close to his mouth. He tried to cover himself with his hands, but the

powerful creature wrenched at his fingers. Tearing three of them clean off one hand, the gnawed stumps pouring blood on his face. Richard screamed then, and kicked out, flailing at them, holding them off for several seconds. But there were monstrously too many and all he won for himself was a few seconds more of unimaginable suffering.

When it was all over, the herd of Buckland Whites came shifting and eddying back to the house, ranging themselves all around, resuming their vigil on every side of the neat, white building. The sheep stayed together at the back while the cats roamed in small packs, hissing their defiance and hatred at anything that crossed their path. The billy-goat had disappeared, as had the dogs, going off into the surrounding hills. None of the geese had been seen since the previous evening.

Paul Thompson had lain for some time on the thin carpet of the farm's parlour, hands over his eyes, knees drawn up protectively to his chest in the foetal position. For some minutes Helene Rusel feared for his sanity. After all that they had gone through it would have been no surprise if they had all been stricken totally mad.

But when she finally knelt beside him, and laid her hand gently on his shoulder, he reached up and squeezed her fingers. He sighed as he looked up into her eyes. The sun was well up, and enough light came through the gaps around the shutters for them to be able to see each other more clearly.

'That's it, old girl,' he said.

'Edwin and Alice.'

'Yes. Better go and see how they are, I suppose.'

'Shall I pour us out a drink?'

'Large ones. God, I hope that Mum and Dad didn't see any of that. Poor old Mum would have popped her clogs at it. With her heart and all.'

He went out of the room and Helene heard his feet slowly mounting the stairs, up past the creaking tread at the bend on the landing. She looked out once more across the yard, towards the pool. Seeing the three ragged corpses. A couple of the greedier boars were fighting over the remains of poor young Gwyneth. Dead without ever having really lived.

The creatures were both pulling at the same arm, tearing at it until it was attached only by stretched sinew to the shoulder. One of the Bucklands let go and went to root under the shattered rib-cage of the teenager, emerging with the loops of greasy intestines, yellow and fouled, tangled about its snout.

She noticed that even the vehicle had been attacked. All the tyres had been chewed and burst, so that the Volvo now sat squarely and uselessly on its wheel hubs. It was quite immobilized.

While she waited for Paul she went and took out two of the large tumblers, sloshing in two generous measures of vodka. She didn't bother with any kind of mixer. The effort was too great.

She sipped at it, feeling the warmth flowing through her body. It would give them both a boost of needed courage, even though it were false. The dresser stood where it had last been shifted, foursquare in the centre of the kitchen. That would have to be moved back again to block off the door. If the pigs were powerful enough to stop a large estate car in its tracks then a single door wasn't likely to present much of a threat.

At that moment she realized that the animals had removed their dead and wounded. Or, more probably, eaten them. Devoured the corpses. The Bucklands injured by the Volvo were gone, as was the dead goat.

Helene heard feet coming slowly down the stairs, along the corridor, towards her. Paul appeared in the doorway to the hall, leaning against the wall. He was shaking his head

and she knew from his expression that there was yet more bad news.

'Alice?'

'No. Funny really. She's sleeping. Peaceful enough.'

'Then?'

Paul took a few faltering steps towards her. 'It's Dad. He's gone. Massive heart attack. Must have been watching what happened to Dick. Christ, that's ironic, isn't it? We were worried about Mum and it was *his* ticker that gave out. Least he didn't suffer. Looked like he didn't know what hit him.'

'What do we do now, Paul?' she asked.

He looked at the floor, his voice barely audible. 'What do we do, love? We wait, Helene. Just wait.'

Chapter 17

'So, there's plenty of food?'

The American girl nodded. As the morning had worn on they had both decided that it was better to be doing something, rather than sit there in the dim, undersea light of the shuttered, curtained room. They'd moved the dresser back, and checked all the windows were safely closed. They occasionally heard one of the pigs squealing outside, but for most of the time the animals were virtually silent.

'Sure. Lots. Only problem is cooking without any electricity. No generator, no nothing. The food in the fridge won't last us long, Paul.'

'It seems cooler than it has been.'

'Sure. But it's damned humid. There's enough stuff in the larder to keep us going for days and days. Tins of beans and soup and fruit. Jars of jelly. Not much bread, though.'

'Water's a problem.'

'Yeah. With everything else I surely never thought about water. The tanker never came, so we must be real low by now.'

'There's not a lot left.'

'How much?'

Paul considered for several seconds before answering, trying to force his exhausted brain to do the necessary calculations. 'Can't be more than ten to fifteen gallons.'

'That'll last us long enough.'

He turned and looked at her, as if he was about to speak in anger. He controlled himself, walking through into the kitchen, standing by the door and listening. He returned and patted her softly on the shoulder. 'Long enough for what; that's the big question? The sixty-four thousand

dollar question. It all depends on what you mean by "enough", doesn't it?'

'Somebody'll come,' Helene said, sipping at the vodka, barely tasting it.

'No. That's foolishness, love. Nobody's coming here. Maybe not for days.'

'Why not?'

'Could be weeks. If the tanker arrives he'll just see the bridge down. Figure it's the rain and go back. Word might slowly filter around that there's been some sort of trouble with the Englishman at Hobb's Farm. You know how careful they are up here at minding their own business.'

'So?'

'So, it could be weeks. And that's not on.'

She sighed. 'I guess that could be right. And I don't relish drinking that pond water, even if we could get out to it.'

Paul nodded, sitting down on the sofa. 'That's right. The animals can all manage on grass and the pool for a while. Most of 'em. From what we've seen, some will turn on others. In that case my money would go on the cats. But some animals can get off the land.'

'Course. The dogs and cats. The rats. Geese have already gone. The goat. Could the pigs?'

'Doubt it. Your Buckland White isn't the most nimble of God's creatures. But if they got desperate enough, then who knows? Christ, love . . . Who can tell anything?'

They managed to move the stiffening corpse of Edwin Thompson. Lifting it together, Helene was surprised at its lightness, carrying it quietly from the bedroom, up a short flight of stairs into the more modern extension, where Paul kept most of his old medical books. They then laid it gently on the spare bed in there and went back downstairs.

Alice didn't wake, and they went and stood together by

her bed, looking down at her, discussing quietly what had happened and what they might do. Outside the room they could see the darkening sky with its promise of more rain. The wind whistled down the wide chimney, fluttering some ornamental paper lining the hearth.

'Looks like another storm coming, Paul,' said Helene, standing by the window, peering out.

'Could be. I'm damned glad that one of the previous owners put these bars across the window. I'd be concerned about those bastard birds trying to break in and get at Mum. Maybe we should bring her down.'

'How about her heart?'

He sucked at his teeth, rubbing a hand thoughtfully across the stubble on his chin. 'Not good. Then again, it was Dad who went. You're thinking about us trying to make a break for it later today?'

'Oh, God, I don't know, honey. It's like being in the Alamo with Crockett and Bowie. Trapped here. Everyone who goes outside gets wasted. If we wait until after dark, then I figure we could maybe make it.'

'I'd have to stay with Mum,' he replied.

'No! You bleedin' wouldn't!'

The voice from the bed behind them was surprisingly loud and strong, making them both jump. Alice Thompson was trying to raise herself on the pillows, eyes glinting in the semi-darkness with an unstoppable determination.

'Mum! You . . .'

'Shut your trap, son. And you, Helene. I'm old and I know I've 'ad a coronary. That's the right posh word, isn't it? Heart attack. But it doesn't mean I'm deaf or bleedin' stupid. I heard 'bout the pigs and I know about all the ones that's passed away. I been awake for a half hour or more, restin' with me eyes shut. So don't try and cosset me with your bedside manner, Paul, there's a good son.'

'You know about Dad?'

She nodded, and there was a trace of a tear on her cheek.

And her voice was less steady. 'Yes. Know that he's gone, God rest his soul. You said it was quick, like, and he didn't feel any pain?'

'That's right, Mum. Same kind of attack as you, only faster and bigger. He honestly wouldn't have known what was happening to him.'

'I'm glad.' She nodded approvingly. 'Bit of a bugger, sometimes, Edwin was. But he respected me. Never did me any harm. Not knowingly. Never laid a hand on me . . . but that I didn't deserve it. What I'd call a good man. You know what I mean, Helene? Like Paul here, eh?' With a knowing wink at the younger woman.

'I think I know, Alice.'

'Good son, he is.'

'Mum. You must lie down now, flat on your back, and get some rest.'

'Why?'

'What do you mean?'

She shook her head, sadly. 'Why should I try and get some rest? Answer me that, Paul? Either of you? Can't, can you? Just so's . . . Oh, my belly's so bloated out. Ah, that's better. Sorry, Helene, but we've always been windy buggers, us Thompsons. Where was I?'

'Telling us why you weren't going to rest,' said Paul.

'Yes. So's I won't be a hindrance on you makin' a break for it. For safety. So what if I can live a while longer and be a burden for others? I don't want to end up a sick, lonely, miserable, bleedin' vegetable, love.'

She was crying properly this time.

'All right, Mum, all right. Look, I'll tell you what we'll do.' He hesitated as they all heard a light rain beginning to patter against the barred window, making the paper in the grate shift and rustle. 'We'll try. Me and Helene. Middle of the night. That rain and the dark should cover us. We can outrun most of the animals here.'

'The dogs,' said Helene, warningly.

'Yes. But there's only two of them, and they're still puppies. Not like Alsatians or anything bloody vicious like that. We can hold them off. Take a couple of good knives each from the kitchen.'

'You do that.' Alice Thompson nodded approvingly. 'I'll be right as ninepence.'

'We'll lock up tight and bolt the house behind us. Go out through the front door. That's got a good stout lock to it. Close your bedroom door safe and snug. Those geese can't get at you with the bars on the window.'

'I think they've gone, anyway. Didn't see them today, during the . . . fight.'

'Yes. So, you'll be safe and . . .'

'Keep the pigs from the door. Better than a bloody old wolf,' finished Alice for him, managing a watery smile for them.

'Yes. Let them huff and puff all they want,' said Helene.

'But they won't blow this house down. All right, children. Off you go, when the time's right. Just look in and say . . . goodbye, when you go. On the way, like.'

'Course, course we will, Mum.'

The day drifted by like a waking dream.

Once they heard banging around the side of the house and ran round to look through the shutters in time to see the surviving cow pressing herself against the front door. But it was sturdy, built more than a hundred years ago from local oak, and it held firm. Yet it was an ominous sign to them that the creatures out there weren't prepared to give up their vigil.

The pigs mostly remained where they'd been, scattered all around the farmhouse, occasionally moving restlessly.

'What are they eating?' asked Helene, some time in the middle of the afternoon.

'I've been watching. I think they've broken into the main

feed storage in the third of the sheds. They seem to be taking it in turns to go in there and eat. Almost as though they had a proper rota for themselves. The sheep are eating normally, away on the upper meadows. But only three or four of them are leaving the house at a time to go and feed.'

'What time should we go, love?'

'It's dark around nine. Maybe earlier with this cloud. Rain keeps coming and going. The way the barometer's dropping we could have some really foul weather by around eleven. I reckon that could be the time to give it a go.'

Helene nodded. 'Should I put on boots and a jumper and extra layers, like Richard and the girls?'

'No. Didn't work for them. Made them slow and clumsy. No, I reckon we go for speed. Trainers. If they get you down, then all the jumpers in the world won't save you. We saw that. Christ, we saw that all right.'

Alice Thompson dozed for most of the day. They woke her at about six in the evening to share a snatched meal with them.

Helene had used up some of the vegetables that had been in the fridge, slicing up some celery, lettuce and tomatoes and some cold potato with a creamy sauce. There was some cold ham but she couldn't bring herself to serve that to them. She took some corned beef and mashed it up with tomato sauce and spices. Bread and butter to complete the first course. And some slightly stale Dundee cake to finish with.

'There's some wine, if you want. Bottle of claret from Caernarfon and the last bottle of the Californian Pinot Chardonnay that I bought in London.'

'Think we'd better stay sober, love. Much as I could fancy a drop.'

'Water?'

'Not that much left. Save it for Mum. Might be some hours before we get back here with help.'

'You think we'll get through?'

After some seconds he nodded. Slowly. 'The hero and heroine always win through in stories, don't they? And that has to be us. Yes, we can.'

'Seriously?'

'Yes. I know this farm better than anyone. Better than the animals. We can run it nearly as fast in the dark as in the light. Only the dogs could keep up with us and be a danger. We're both fit and healthy. Course we'll make it.'

She reached up, on the tips of her toes, and kissed him gently on the lips. 'Then there's time to make love, Paul. Now, darling. Come and make love to me, right here and now.'

On the floor of the parlour, with cushions from the chairs and the sofa, they did it. Alice was sleeping again in her room, and the animals were quiet.

It was slow and tender, with them feeling their way towards a surprising, breath-stopping climax. They lay tangled together, listening to the rain as it blew in great gusts against the windows. Paul smiled down at her and kissed her tenderly on the cheek, cupping her breast with his long fingers.

'Love you very much, darling. Just thought I'd mention it.'

She grinned. 'Jesus, but you English are so goddamned strong and silent. But I love you for it, Doctor Paul. Love you loads. Hey, why don't we try and do that one more time?'

So they did.

After supper they changed into clean clothes.

Both of them put on black cords and trainers. Helene wore a t-shirt and a dark navy roll-neck sweater. Paul had a black anorak over a check shirt. He wore his favourite knife, with its stag-hoof hilt, tucked into his belt. Helene carried two short kitchen knives, razor-sharp, one on each side of her broad leather belt.

'Ready?'

She nodded. 'Best go see how Alice is. We promised to say our farewells to her.'

'Yes. You've taken up enough food?'

'Sure. Last her days. That room's got a real good door on it, too. She's got most of the water that's left. It looks kind of sandy, but I guess that's because it's from the bottom of the tank.'

They went quietly, hand in hand, up the steep staircase, easing into the small, cosy room. So much rain had come down the chimney that the pretty paper was sodden and smeared with wet soot. The drizzle had begun to fall with a steady menace around four, and had grown harder, not once stopping. The sky was leaden, showing only a section of moon, obscured by driven shreds of cloud. A mist shrouded the shoulder of Mynydd Du.

Through the barred window there was still a little light for them to see that most of the pigs had returned to their pens, out of the way of the storm. The rest of the animals had also disappeared, finding shelter in the open barn or among the outbuildings.

All of that pushed the odds very firmly in favour of their escape.

'She's sleeping soundly,' whispered Helene, standing by the bed.

The old lady was lying half on her side, breathing steadily, mouth a little way open, her breath hissing in the silence. Asleep, the wrinkles of age were partly smoothed out and she looked uncannily younger. Paul stooped over her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Alice moved her head,

murmuring something, half-smiling. But staying asleep.

'Best leave her. She'll know that we've gone. I'll pull the curtain across and turn the wick down on that oil-lamp. It'll last longer. I've put the spare can of paraffin by the door. Right. Come on, Helene.'

They left together, and Paul pulled the door quietly shut behind them, making sure that the catch had clicked firmly home. On the landing they stood close together and Helene kissed him again, on the lips. She held him tight, feeling a sudden need for reassurance of his arms around her.

'I think she'll be fine,' he said. 'I doubt very much that any of the animals could get in the house at all. Not for a long time. And the big sods won't get up the stairs. Too steep and narrow for the pigs, or the cow. And the rats and the cats wouldn't be able to get that door open on their own. No, she's all right.'

Down on the ground floor, Paul hesitated at the bottom of the stairs, looking back towards where his mother slept. Helene touched him on the arm. 'She'll be fine, honey. It's you and me need worrying about. Let's go.'

'No. Let's wait another half hour. Be darker still. We can cut up the back, past the rabbit's hutch. Then fork left and climb as high as we can on the slope of the field. There's some very rough ground up there, close by the Hermit's Cave. The wall runs into some fallen boulders there. Difficult in the night, but I know it. Know the way, I mean.'

'Could we hide in the cave?'

It was a cleft in the mountain, narrow and steep-sided, barely deep enough for shelter.

'No. They'd find us at first light.'

Time crept by. The storm increased in violence so that the door rattled on its hinges. The shutters rocked and creaked so that the whole house seemed about to slide away from its anchorage on the bare rock.

Finally, Paul stood up, stretching nervously. Carefully,

he blew out the lamp so that the parlour filled with the heavy scent of smoky oil. 'Let's do it,' he said.

As he pushed the front door cautiously open the wind tugged at it, nearly wrenching it away. Outside it was midnight black, impossible to see more than ten paces. He shook his head. 'Can't tell. Might be a hundred Bucklands sharpening their tusks. Might be nothing. Got to chance it. Yes?'

She squeezed his hand in the darkness. Together they slipped into the night, only pausing while Paul carefully closed the front door of Hobb's Farm, pushing his shoulder against it to make certain it was locked.

In her room at the top of the house, Alice Thompson slept calmly on, untroubled by any dream.

Chapter 18

Paul was dying.

One of the dubious advantages of being a doctor was that you could swiftly recognize the onrush of eternity, even when it was your own passing. Before he managed to slit the dog from jaw to groin, Bryn had opened up Paul's throat. Tearing out the big artery that pulsed at the side of his neck as he fought on the streaming grass against the other snarling collie. He'd killed Gor as well. Ripping its belly apart with a thrust of the knife.

The knife was very sharp.

Its handle was long and narrow, made from the hoof of a Scottish stag, bound with black insulating tape to give a firmer grip. The blade was eleven and three-quarter inches in length, tapered to a keen point. The edge had been honed lovingly, using a whetstone, with slow, circular movements.

Gor had come out of the darkness like an avenging wraith, a sibilant snarl bubbling at the back of its throat, coat dripping in the driving downpour.

It had hit the man from behind, across the top of the thighs, sending Paul on his face, rolling in the slimy mud. His feet had scrabbled for a purchase on the steep slope of the field.

Helene had screamed and he'd shouted for her to go on. She'd disappeared from him in the storm as he fell a good fifty to sixty feet. Both dogs were there, yapping and biting at him. In that first sliding fall he was bitten a dozen times, but none of the bites was serious. Surface nips that drew blood. It was the scent and taste of Paul's blood that

seemed to encourage the collies, making them howl and battle harder.

Then the knife was out.

Gor was sent tumbling, its guts spilling from a deep slash across its stomach. It bit at itself, spinning round and round, water spraying from its shaggy coat. Paul managed to struggle to his hands and knees, and that was when Bryn came in at him.

It wasn't as strong as a full-grown sheep-dog, but its teeth were strong enough to bite through an artery. And its aim was true. Paul felt it go. Actually heard his own life-blood spurting yards away.

There was time.

A few seconds to snatch at Bryn and use the knife on it. Taking a brief revenge by opening it from chin to stomach, pushing it away from him. There was a little light on the storm-blasted hillside and the man saw the dog writhing on its side, coils of intestines flowering from the dark lips of the cut.

Then there was nothing for Paul Thompson to do but sit patiently in the streaming rain, feeling his life ebbing from him. Once he reached up and made a token gesture of trying to press his wet fingers against the jagged, pulsing bite, but he knew how feeble and hopeless that was.

Helene was calling out to him. Shouting to find where he was. Whether he was all right.

Paul wanted to shout back. Wanted to yell up the hill for her to go on. Go on and find safety. Tell her that both the dogs were dead. No other threat. Not pigs. Not sheep.

Nothing else.

He heard her sobbing his name, above the wind and the rain, somewhere in the teeming blackness of the lost hillside above him.

Paul tried.

He opened his mouth, but the effort to try and form

words was too great. There would have been something about loving Helene.

Then he became preoccupied with the mystery of his own dying and lay on the cold earth and closed his eyes.

Helene Rusel was finally on her own.

The rain and the blackness swirled around her, tugging at her hair, dashing water in her eyes so that she could see nothing. She was on the furthest edge of panic, barely hanging on to sanity. It was as though she'd been running for an eternity across a land built by some malign lord of chaos with a talent for torture. Rocks tripped her and the land sloped away so unexpectedly that she kept falling and rolling.

It had been a miracle that she had maintained contact with Paul, but now he was gone.

'Paul,' she cried, the gale tearing the words from her lips, dashing them across the bleak face of Mynydd Du.

In her heart she knew that he was lost. Lost to her for ever.

Helene had glimpsed the dogs as they came scurrying in, low-bellied, teeth white in the storm's darkness. Then Paul's hand was ripped from hers and she was aware only that he had fallen. There hadn't even been a cry from him. She didn't know the lie of the land about the farm and wasn't sure which way he would have rolled.

Crying quietly to herself, Helene finally found the last shreds of courage and dropped to the grass, feeling with outstretched hands, crawling slowly down the hill in the midnight gloom to where she thought he might have gone. She moved painfully on, disregarding the sharp stones that cut her legs through her jeans.

The body of one of the collies came first. The matted, bloodied hairs of the rough coat. The American drew back from it in shock, before she realized what it must be. It gave

her a temporary surge of hope. She tried to call out Paul's name once more, but the wind raged and she heard nothing.

It took her the better part of an hour before she finally found Paul's corpse. Even then she nearly missed it, crawling back again up the hill, all hope gone. He was cold, lying half on his side, face flattened against the streaming grass. With chilled hands Helene succeeded in closing his eyes against the rain. There was nothing more she could do for him.

Before leaving his body she prised the knife from his stiffening fingers.

Back at Hobb's Farm, Alice Thompson woke with a start. The room glowed with the golden, cosy light of the oil-lamp, casting its gentle, reassuring shadows over the walls. The house was quite silent and the old woman guessed that her son had left with Helene on their bid for safety. Outside she could hear the most ferocious storm raging, hurling rain at the shining glass of the window. It was rather like being snug in bed at the top of a lighthouse tower while the sea boiled and hissed beneath. Alice rather liked that fantasy and closed her eyes to relish it, beginning to mutter a prayer for Paul's and Helene's safety, but she was very tired and slipped quietly into sleep again.

'Hermit's Cave,' gasped Helene. Staggering as the wind caught her, she realized at last where she was. The storm had eased for the last few minutes and the moon shone dimly through the splintered clouds. She was less than two hundred yards from where they'd been aiming for, where the ravine was less steep and the wall to climb was less high.

It was a natural cave, one that she and Paul had christened together, imagining some hairy old recluse

dwelling there. They had even invented a name for him, calling him the Blessed Saint Bubo of Ishmaelia, and he had been the subject of a number of private jokes over the months that they'd been living together at the farm.

The opening in the side of the hill was less than six feet high, and it only went in comfortably about a dozen feet. But it offered a brief shelter from the eldritch wind outside. Helene had been so buffeted that she felt deaf, wiping rain from face and eyes and struggling to steady her breathing.

Gradually she recovered herself. Sitting cross-legged on the stony ground, fighting to stop herself shaking from shock and exhaustion, she found that her eyes were gradually becoming accustomed to the deeper blackness of the little cavern and she could make out the lighter circle of the world outside.

Even with the terrible weather, she knew now that she was going to make it. At the most it would take her five minutes to the wall. Another careful ten minutes to work her way down the sides of the steep valley. Probably there would be a stream flowing at the bottom of it, but it couldn't be that deep. Then across the fields and gently on downwards towards the main road.

Paul had killed both dogs. She'd found both their bodies close by his corpse. Bryn and Gor had been the only real threat to them, and they were dead. Whatever the chemicals in the water might do, they wouldn't bring creatures back from the grave.

In some ways Paul had given his life to save her, to give her freedom and life. It was something that Helene knew she would never forget.

Not as long as she lived.

'Let's get the show on the road,' she whispered to herself, standing up and stretching. For a moment she thought that she saw something moving in the mouth of the small cave. Her heart pounded and she froze, gripping the knife tightly in her right hand. But when she moved cautiously closer,

staring intently, there was nothing there.

She picked her way carefully over the uneven surface, reaching the outside again. She paused as the wind lashed at her, rain beating down once more. Instinctively, Helene closed her eyes and half-turned her head away.

There was a blow.

A double blow, on her face.

Burning pain in her right eye. And in the left eye. Warm blood streaming over her cheeks.

Helene Rusel screamed. The attack, from the blank darkness, tipped her finally over the crevasse into insanity.

Her hands went to her face, feeling stickiness and heat from the scratches around her eyes.

Her eyes!

Despite the wind and rain and the deep night, Helene had been able to see *something*. Now, though she turned her face frantically from side to side, she could see nothing. Absolutely nothing.

One of the surrounding cats sprang lightly at her, clawing up her clothes to her neck. Effortlessly perching on her shoulder. It dabbed out a paw with delicate accuracy, making sure that both eyes had gone. Both shredded in their sockets by the sharp claws.

Helene heard the screech of triumph shrill in her ears. She tried to battle off the pack as they came at her, but their needle teeth and claws were everywhere. By chance she struck at one or two. Holding one and yanking its neck apart. But there were too many for her. Dozens that swarmed at her. Blood streaming from fifty bites and a hundred scratches.

The woman tried to run, but the hunting pack tripped her and she fell. Rolling on the slick turf as Paul had rolled before.

Helene never got up again.

Soon, quite soon, despite the raging storm, the cats gathered about her, lapping and nibbling at the warm flesh.

There was a dreadful flapping, fluttering noise, loud in the room. Jerking Alice Thompson awake so that she started upright, feeling a sudden stab of pain in her chest at the shock.

She tried to sit up and recover her balance, and then she saw it.

Them.

The surviving geese. Five of them, all with their feathers awry, daubed with wet soot. More soot piled around the hearth, the fancy paper torn and crumpled.

Fortunately, and mercifully, Alice died instantly of heart failure.

And it was over. All over.

Chapter 19

'*Whisper secrets to the wind . . .*' The driver was singing along with the radio. Enjoying a golden oldie that came from his own teenage days.

'*It's over, it's over . . .*'

Roy Orbison, from 1964. It was a shock to realize that it was all of twenty years ago. Where had all that time gone?

The traffic was moving painfully slowly and the driver, Steve Winstanley, banged his fist on the horn of the heavy lorry. Knowing that it was a futile gesture, but it slightly relieved his anger at the delay.

Mister Herneson wasn't going to be happy if the load was delivered too late. The foreman on the dump who was on the take knocked off at six, and his successor had a reputation for being too bloody careful about checking off the load on the inventory against the actual load carried on the lorry.

The main trouble today had been from the roadworks. Massive flyovers and interchanges, all for some kind of orbital motorway, whatever that was. Steve had read about it in the papers but he hadn't expected the diversions to be so far-reaching. The traffic had been shunted off by policemen, sending cars and lorries and coaches on a long and winding detour along narrow side-streets and under railway bridges. Now they were picking their way in single file along an elevated section of a bumpy minor road, running down the side of a huge reservoir.

Steve couldn't remember the name of it, though he'd once been taken fishing there by his Uncle Colin. It fed most of central London with water. Millions of gallons every day.

The cattle-truck was still ahead of him, the stench from it wafting back through the heat of early autumn. Steve finally wound his window right up, turning on the air-conditioning in the cab, switching the radio's volume up as high as it would go to try and take his mind off the aggravation.

The half-hour news came on with an item on the big livestock show in the centre of London. Steve wondered vaguely whether all those animals would mean more water being taken from the reservoir he was driving past. He guessed that it must supply them directly.

'Largest show on the hoof! Eight thousand cattle with a special category for pigs. Nearly five thousand porkers all under one roof. That's a whole lot of bacon for anyone to bring home.'

Steve pulled a face and turned off the radio. But that thought of so many pigs all at once was daunting. His mind wandered vaguely as the convoy of slow-moving vehicles snaked by the glittering sheet of water. How to feed so many animals. If any of them broke loose in central London the confusion would be devastating.

The truck in front of him suddenly accelerated, and Steve followed suit. Speeding up to thirty miles an hour. He glanced again to his left, down the short sharp drop into the reservoir.

A few yards ahead of him there was a cyclist, wobbling a little in the strong cross wind. He was wearing a neat dark suit, made dusty by all the traffic. He was a priest from Ealing, named Patrick Smith. A confirmed Jansenist in his views, he was on his way to have a meal with his old college professor who owned a small terraced house only a mile beyond the big reservoir.

As he pedalled through the bright sunshine, the vicar's thoughts were on a sermon that he had been working on for some days and that was nearly ready to be launched on an eager congregation.

The road really wasn't suitable for the volume of heavy traffic using it since the diversion, and its surface had become dangerously rutted, coated with a layer of rubber and oil. Light rain the previous evening had helped to make the surface slick and dangerous.

Thirty or so vehicles in front of the artic, a young policeman stepped suddenly off the verge, holding up his right hand. Stopping the traffic so that a party of anglers could get across to the reservoir.

The gleaming water had distracted many of the drivers, and the appearance of the policeman brought a spate of violent braking. As Steve slammed down on the brake pedal he saw the cattle truck immediately in front of him lurch sideways.

The attention of the Reverend Patrick Smith was dragged from his sermon to the present by the squealing of brakes and the shrieking of horns. He saw the large truck slewing in front of him and he gripped both brakes at once. The bike skidded uncontrollably, throwing him off on his right hip.

In front of Steve's artic.

Not leaving him a lot of choice.

It wasn't that dramatic.

The long truck went off the road to the left, demolishing a narrow triple wire fence. As its front wheels slithered ponderously over the edge, Steve felt the entire rig beginning to go. There was just time for him to heave open his cab door and jump out. Landing safely, he sprawled on the dusty grass while he watched his lorry rolling over twice.

The tarpaulin was torn off the back, and the entire roped load was shed. Some of the heavy drums were crushed by the weight of the trailer, spilling their contents as they rolled down the concrete rim of the reservoir. More of them jostled and cracked, sending plumes of multi-coloured powders into the still afternoon air.

Altogether about seventy drums vanished into the placid waters. Eventually, all of them were recovered. All of them, as far as the authorities could tell. Because Jedediah Herneson wasn't very thorough, despite all his previous warnings, in keeping his paperwork up to date. And there was some confusion about precisely what the driver had been transporting.

It was only a minor accident. More of an incident, and it didn't merit more than a few lines in the evening papers. The front pages were taken up with photographs of a visiting aging American lady film star, squatting on the back of an enormous Buckland White pig at the opening of the agricultural show.

The police were a little worried, as were the authorities of the Water Board, when they found out that a number of drums had leaked their contents into the reservoir. But the amounts seemed very small, and the purification procedures were very thorough.

They managed only to identify three of the chemicals, though there had obviously been more on the load.

By a coincidence, the report on this incident was filed on the very next shelf to the one concerning the road accident in Snowdonia, on the road to Caernarfon, earlier that same year. But nobody ever saw the connection.

Not ever.

It wasn't until the third morning of the agricultural show in the middle of London that anyone began to suspect that anything was wrong . . .

THE END?